ing, emphatically, that violence is self-defeating, that he who lives by the sword will perish by the sword.

At. MMFR: Sync Sound 103.

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project

Address to MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church

22 March 1956
Montgomery, Ala.

Hours after his conviction for violating Alabama’s antiboycott law, King declares that “the protest is still on” to the thousands gathered at Holt Street Baptist Church. As hymns such as “We Shall Not Be Moved,” “Go, Send Me Oh Lord,” and “Walk Together, Children” filled the church, a participant remarked, “We all wanted to be together tonight and we [wanted] to be here, because this is where we started.” As King entered amid thundering cheers, a platform speaker declared that “he who [was] nailed to the cross for us this afternoon approaches,” while several audience members commented “He’s next to Jesus himself,” “We are sure with him,” [and] “He’s my darling.” During his speech King discusses his trial and expresses confidence that he will win the appeal. “You don’t get to the promised land without going through the wilderness,” he concludes. “Though we may not get to see the promised land, we know it’s coming because God is for it.” Coretta Scott King sent an audiotape recording of King’s remarks to Cecil and Fran Thomas, her former teachers, who transcribed excerpts of it as follows.

“As I look at it, I guess I have committed three sins. The first sin I have committed is being born a Negro. The second sin that I have committed, along with all of us, is being subjected to the battering rams of segregation and oppression. The third and more basic sin which all of us have committed is the sin of having the moral courage to stand up and express our weariness of this oppression. . . . Thank God we are no longer content to accept second-class citizenship, but we are determined to struggle for justice and equality.”

“Today the judge handed down a decision which said in substance that I am guilty of dis-obeying the anti-boycott law. The fine was $500. As you know, the penalty could have been six months in prison and $1,000, but I was very happy to hear Judge Carter say that he was a little lenient because I had enough religion in me to at least preach non-violence.3 We must not totally condemn Judge Carter. He was in a tragic dilemma. Maybe he did the best he could under the expedient method. As you know, men in political positions allow themselves to suc-

1. Quoted in Anna Holden, Notes, MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church, 22 March 1956.
2. Ibid.
3. According to Holden, King also said: “I think we were aware of the consequences before the cases came up. I think we knew when we started that this might happen. I [was] enough of an optimist to expect the best, but enough of a realist to also expect the worst.”
cumb to the expedient rather than reaching out for the moral that might be eternally corrective and true."

"We are not bitter. We are still preaching non-violence. We are still using the weapon of love. We are still using the method of passive resistance. I feel confident that as this case moves up through the higher courts, somewhere along the way the decision will be reversed."

"And let us not lose faith in democracy. For with all of its weaknesses, there is a ground and a basis of hope in our democratic creed. If we have the courage in America to transform democracy from thin paper to thick action, we will find that we are involved in the greatest form of government that the mind has ever conceived. So we’re not to lose faith in democracy. We feel that democracy gives us this right to protest."

"We have never and we do not intend to engage in any acts of violence. There was no evidence in the court to point out that we have participated in violence. Five or six cases were brought out, but never on any occasion did they prove that these acts of violence were carried out by Negroes. So we can say and we can be true to ourselves and we can say honestly that we have not advocated violence and we have not participated in violence, but that we have gone courageously with the Christian movement."

"This is a spiritual movement and we are depending on moral and spiritual forces. That is the only weapon we have."

"The protest is still on. And we want it known throughout the length and breadth of this land—to Asia and Africa—let the world know—that we are standing up for justice. Christianity has always insisted that in the perennial struggle between good and evil, the forces of light will eventually emerge as the victor. God is speaking to his children today and saying, ‘Don’t play with me! For if you keep playing with me, I’ll break the backbone of your power and knock you out of the orbits of your international and national prestige. I am going to be God in this universe.’ We want the world to know that we believe in God, and we believe that God controls the destiny of the universe, and Evil can’t triumph in this universe. This is our hope. This is the thing that keeps us going."

"Freedom doesn’t come on a silver platter. Whenever there is any great movement toward freedom, there will inevitably be some tension. Somebody will have to have the courage to sacrifice. You don’t get to the promised land without going through the wilderness. Though we may not get to see the promised land, we know it’s coming because God is for it. So don’t worry about some of the things we have to go through. They are just a necessary part of the great movement that we are making toward freedom. There can never be growth without growing pains. Let us continue with the same spirit, with the same orderliness, with the

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4. Holden recorded more of King’s speech: “I want you to know that for the last two months I have had a great rendezvous with the jail house. I was arrested for driving 35 miles an hour and put in a cell. I went to court and was convicted and fined. I went to jail again with some of the finest citizens of Montgomery when we were arrested for breaking the anti-boycott law. I had to go to court this week and now I will have to go again. I might have to go four or five times more. This past conviction, the one before it, and all they can heap upon us will not diminish our determination one iota. (two rounds of applause) I’m going to stand in the morning, stand in the afternoon and stand in the evening.)
same discipline, with the same Christian approach. I believe that God is using Montgomery as his proving ground. It may be that here in the capital of the Confederacy, the birth of the ideal of freedom in America and in the Southland can be born. God be praised for you, for your loyalty, for your determination. God bless you and keep you, and may God be with us as we go on."  

TTa. MLKP-MBU: Box 80.

5. Holden noted that following King's address and testimonials from other MIA leaders, he returned to the podium: "I want to ask you all a question. I want to ask you because they said in court that I started the protest. They said that a selfish, power-seeking group who wanted to get publicity started it. Who started the protest? Audience—'We did.' 'The bus drivers'. 'The bus company'. King—I heard that you are tired of it. Are you tired? Audience—'No, No.' 'We're going to keep on.'"

From Frank L. Stanley

22 March 1956
Louisville, Ky.

The editor of the Louisville Defender informs King that his 18 March sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church will be published in his newspaper. Stanley was in Montgomery to cover the trial for the newspaper and convey Alpha Phi Alpha's support for its fellow member. Stanley, fraternity general secretary James Huger, and southern vice president Lewis O. Swingler presented a check for $1,000 to the MIA at a 20 March mass meeting.

Reverend M. L. King, Jr.
Dexter Avenue Baptist Church
Montgomery, Alabama

Dear Brother King:

Here is a copy of your sermon as copied by me. I plan to use it in a feature I am doing on Montgomery.

If at all convenient, send me by return air mail special a photo of you and wife or alone, or in a group. I am assuming that you have prints of some of the many photos made of you. I want to use them to help raise some money for the cause that you are so nobly fighting.

It was a source of unlimited inspiration to be with you during the beginning days of your trial. Your father and I journed back to Louisville together and I had the opportunity of meeting your fine mother in the Atlanta airport.

Alpha will be sending you additional sums. The least we can do is to supply

2. Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Newsletter 5, no. 4 (23 March 1956).