

# MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

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*So the poor have hope, and injustice shuts its mouth.*

—JOB 5:16 (NIV)

Hope lingers in the dark night of winter, hidden deep in the soil where it cannot be seen but where its potential is undeniable.

Hope believes a different way of being exists despite all evidence to the contrary.

Hope stirs the smoldering ashes of courage into a raging conflagration of action.

Hope causes us to take a leap of faith when the ground below us eludes our eyes.

Hope bears the weight of the oppressor's yoke.

Hope sees a future reality that seems light years away as clearly as if it were in this present moment.

Where does hope come from? How does hope survive? How does hope yet to be realized not meld into bitterness? Scientists believe that hope is a mechanism in the brain that allows humans to adapt and survive in dangerous conditions. Not so Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He believed that hope is grounded in the reality of God's desire for justice. Hope is not merely positive thinking, clever optimism, or wishing on a star. Justice, egalitarianism, and mercy—inherent characteristics of God—are immutable and set loose in the universe by the ubiquitous presence of the Divine, and therefore they cannot be resisted forever. Progress may be slow and setbacks common, however. "The moral arc of the universe is long, but it is bent toward justice," King said of the struggle for civil rights, paraphrasing the writing of nineteenth-century Unitarian pastor Theodore Parker.



MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. TO  
WAS BORN IN THIS HOUSE  
JANUARY 15, 1929

Martin Luther King Jr. birthplace on Auburn Avenue in Atlanta

The King Center, one of several places included in this National Historical Park, honors not just King's accomplishments but also the people who influenced him. Central in this list of philosophers, theologians, and activists is Mahatma Gandhi and his commitment to nonviolence. King blended the Gandhian pacificism of nonviolence with the Christian dictum to love *even the enemy*. He believed this was an unstoppable force. "*Darkness cannot drive out darkness—only light can do that.*" The movement for civil rights had to be one of nonviolence because God abhorred killing, and history was littered with stories of the oppressed whose bonds, broken by force, simply became a new oppressor themselves.

Displays at King's birth home share that King was a typical child who didn't care much about practicing the piano. Yet the Ebenezer Baptist Church, where his father served as pastor before King Jr. was called to lead, demonstrates the pivotal role faith played in his life. From the pulpit, first father and then son proclaimed the First Testament

prophets crying out for justice. Reading and studying texts from the perspective of the exploited gave credence to the idea that God is on the side of the oppressed and that liberation from bondage, breaking the yoke of injustice, is always God's preference.

Here King encountered and embraced the writings and teachings of great religious leaders and theologians such as Benjamin Mays, Walter Rauschenbusch, Howard Thurman, and Reinhold Niebuhr. The neighborhood itself reflects the old segregated



**Ebenezer Baptist Church, where Martin Luther King and Martin Luther King Jr. served**

South and its gradual transformation. In a park opposite Ebenezer Baptist Church is *Behold*, Patrick Morelli's sculpture depicting a man lifting a newborn child skyward. Morelli was inspired by the African tradition of lifting a child toward the heavens and reciting the words "Behold, the only thing greater than yourself." Nearby, the old fire

station #6, one of the first desegregated firehouses in Atlanta, served the Sweet Auburn community. The World Peace Garden is part of an international movement to teach peace and nonviolence to youth.

This National Historical Park is less about a place and more about how a man who grew up in this particular neighborhood became the very embodiment of hope as the most notable leader in the American civil rights movement. A reverent visit to the gravesite of Dr. and Mrs. King is a reminder of the price that is sometimes required of those who dare to dream that the way the world is, is not the way it has to be. King's wife, Coretta, and his family endured much suffering and loss as he struggled to be a voice in the halls of power for those who otherwise would not be heard. King himself paid for his dream with his own life.

For what do you hope? When has hope kept you going against all odds? How do you give others hope?



Inside the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church sanctuary



Tomb of Dr. and Mrs. King