

'That's How I Got to Memphis'

by James E. Lamkin

There's a Tom T. Hall song that expresses the effort required by love. Love will lead a lover to a faraway city to help a friend who is in trouble. If necessary, it will, "follow the trail of her tears." The song tells the haunting tale: *That's How I Got to Memphis*.

Come to think of it, that is my story, too. I finally got to Memphis.

I was there with about 60 Atlanta clergy – some black, some white. We had talked monthly for a year; my own story of region, religion and racism was on the table. And now, the trail of tears led me to Memphis for the 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination.

Delta Airlines provided a charter flight for the King Center clergy group. We went together to the Lorraine Motel, now the National Civil Rights Museum. We stood near the railing where King was shot. I saw a picture of one of my mentors, Rev. Will D. Campbell from Mississippi, standing on that balcony in the darkness on that fateful night long ago.

I think it was Ralph Abernathy who wisely said on the day after the shooting, "We are not as much concerned about *who* killed Martin, as to *what* killed Martin?"

As I see it, there is a "lot of *what*." To start with, there were 25 decades of slavery. Slavery built the U.S. Capitol Building. Ironically, slave labor helped construct the *Freedom* statue that sits atop the dome.

The 250 years of slavery were then followed by 100 years of Jim Crow. I heard Mitch Landrieu, Mayor of New Orleans, speak to this recently at the Atlanta History Center. His new book, *In the Shadow of Statues*, tells again why the confederate monuments were erected in the Crescent City and the South so many years after the Civil War.

The math and aftermath of 35 decades packs a lot of gunpowder into a rifle bullet, and into incendiary streets, by the 1960s.

Non-violence is a tough pill to swallow in a violence-addicted world. The 1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers March began non-violently. But, the peaceful protest was hijacked; and it broke King's heart.

He returned to Memphis on April 3, 1968, trying again to teach those who had given in to centuries of systemic violence. That night, during a pounding rain storm at Mason Temple Church, King gave his mountaintop speech.

Fifty years later, to the very minute, I sat in that same crowded room. Around me were my Atlanta clergy colleagues. Beside me was my neighbor, Rev. Pam Driesell, pastor of Trinity Presbyterian. Rev. Raphael Warnock of Historic Ebenezer was nearby.

It has been a long journey; and mine is not yet over. But, Tuesday night, April 3, 2018, was one of those rare moments in my life when I knew that I was exactly at the right place, at the right time, with the right people ... on the mountaintop.

That's how I got to Memphis.

James E. Lamkin is pastor of Alliance congregational partner Northside Drive Baptist Church in Atlanta, Ga.