

NO TURNING BACK

My Summer with Daddy King



Gurdon Brewster

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Brewster Gets Ebenezer



I ENTERED THE ROOM, full of excitement, and sat down near the front. Soon one of the leaders of the Student Interracial Ministry at Union Theological Seminary in New York City called to order those of us who were interested in the program and opened with a few remarks. The meeting was a blur in my mind until the leader began reading the names of the churches that were expecting seminary students for the summer. “I’m looking for volunteers,” he said.

When the name “Ebenezer” was called out, I shot my hand into the air. There was a moment of silence as my hand waved with determination like an inappropriately large flag planted in the middle of a mall parking lot. I dared not look behind me to see if other hands were also waving. I waited nervously, my hand vigorously telling the world of my intentions.

“Okay,” the leader broke the silence. “Brewster gets Ebenezer.” I nodded quietly while my heart exploded inside me. I had been assigned the Ebenezer Baptist Church!

In 1961, the pastors of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, were Reverend Martin Luther King Sr. and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I was to be their assistant for the summer. My choice was not an accident. I had done enough homework on the civil rights movement and the role of Dr. King Jr. to know that Ebenezer was the one church where I wanted to work that summer. Ebenezer had been a leader in the struggle for social justice for decades under

Daddy King's leadership. Long before the civil rights movement, Daddy King had spoken out for the rights of black people and the poor and had become known as a leader in the city with a vision for how justice could become a reality in their lives.

Rosa Parks had refused to give up her seat in the front of a bus on December 1, 1955, only five years before I was to go south. After leading the Montgomery bus boycott, Martin Luther King Jr. moved to Atlanta to set up the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and to join his father as co-pastor at Ebenezer. He had been there for about a year when the Student Interracial Ministry — the SIM, as it was called — obtained an invitation to send a white student into his church. I was to be one of eight white students who were to do summer work in various black churches around the South.

I had not heard that any of the other seminary students who planned to be part of the SIM wanted to go to Ebenezer. Perhaps the name of Dr. King frightened them away. Or perhaps it was my hand, waving with such frenzied intensity, that discouraged others from competing with me for my first choice. In any case, suddenly my name was written beside Ebenezer on the blackboard, and the meeting quietly moved on. Inside, I was terrified. My life was about to change in ways I could never have anticipated.

As the news of my going to Ebenezer began to spread around Union Seminary, where I was in my middle year of study, many students and faculty didn't know what to make of it. They said things like "Are you sure?" "Do you know what you are getting into?" "Is this what you really want to do?" and "I wouldn't, if I were you." I was beginning to be filled with doubts, generated by the violence that had accompanied Dr. King in the Montgomery bus boycott and the violence and threats of violence surrounding the sit-in movement, which

at that time was generating momentum in the South. People were being beaten up, death threats were in the air, and the Ku Klux Klan seemed to be ominously growing in strength.

I had been drawn into the church by a gospel that sought to change the world for the better, and I was attracted to Ebenezer by Dr. King's compelling vision of freedom. Here was a Christian I wanted to follow and when the opportunity arose, I wanted to get as near as I could to this man of vision and action. Even though I was an Episcopalian, I knew I would learn a lot by working in a Baptist church that was alive with the social gospel. The threats of danger that seemed to me to be magnified by my wary friends began to worry me, I admit, but they also challenged me to go where few others had gone. I wanted to experience a church and a movement where social change engaged people's hearts and minds, and the possibility of becoming enveloped in the spirit of social transformation called me to take the risk. While I really had no idea what I was getting into and while I could read concern in the facial expressions of many people, a few rejoiced with me, and I leaned on their support.

A few days later, I went to my mother's for dinner. I had not told her of my plans, and I wondered what she would say. "Mom," I said, when we were relaxing before dinner, "I want to tell you of my plans for this summer." I could see that she was eager to hear, so I said, "I am going to work with Martin Luther King and be his assistant at the Ebenezer Baptist Church."

Her eyes opened, her mouth dropped. I suddenly feared her disapproval, and in the gaping silence I wished I hadn't said it. But all at once a great smile of joy and amazement spread across her whole face. "I am thrilled," she said. "Tell me more."

My mother had been a pioneer in her own day, although that was a long time ago. She had gone to medical school

in 1923 and had spent the summer of 1926 in the Kentucky mountains, a medical student, taking medicine to a remote place that had never seen a doctor. I suddenly sensed that I was tapping into her pioneering, perhaps rebellious spirit and that I was following a path she had charted for herself some forty years before. A short while after our dinner together a friend told her with disapproving scorn, "He will never be a bishop if he works with Martin Luther King." My mother rose to my defense. She told him that having this experience was an extraordinary opportunity in my life and was not to be passed by. I treasured her encouragement.

Early one June morning, I started up my 1946 Chevrolet and headed south into a world I had never experienced and couldn't imagine. I left from Peninsula, Ohio, where I had been visiting Martha, my girlfriend. She supported me in the venture, and her words "Go for it" rang in my ears. I carried them with me all summer. "I can't wait to hear all about it. Write me every day," she said, and as I was climbing into my car she whispered, "I love you." I would marry her two years later, but now her whisper was like wind in my sails.

Beside me on the seat were my sleeping bag and some maps, as I was prepared to sleep out in the open air if the weather was good. For the first night, I found a beautiful secluded place overlooking a lake created by the Tennessee Valley Authority. The stars were bright overhead and the bugs were few. I awoke as the sun flooded the lake, turning the wisps of fog that drifted slowly with the wind into golden puffs. I drove through the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, where I found a stream that was cold, fast, and clear. It served well as a place in which to shave and bathe. By this time the sun had warmed the rocks, and I rested there an hour or so, absorbed in the extraordinary beauty of the place and reflecting on the experience into which I was heading.

The farthest south I had ever been was on a vacation trip to Williamsburg with my family when I was about twelve years old. I had never lived in a black community or worshiped in a black church. I was full of excitement, but apprehension began to dominate my feelings as I drove deeper into this foreign land. All the questions with which I had been flooded before I left now clamored for answers. Why was I doing this? As an Episcopalian from the North, didn't I belong in the North? Was I going to be hurt? Would I be killed? Would I be rejected by the people I was going to work with? In spite of my fears, I kept my Chevy pointing south. The roads were endlessly long, and the early summer days already hinted at the terrible heat that was soon to come.

I was heading toward Ashville to a small conference organized for the white seminary students who would be working in black churches for the summer. When thunderclouds darkened the sky that evening, I found an inexpensive hotel for the night. The next day I joined about ten others at the conference. The most important part of that conference, which was to prepare us for the work ahead, was that I received \$300 in cash. I was too shy to tell people that I had very little money and that even an inexpensive hotel was a serious strain on my wallet. "Oh, you're the one going to Ebenezer," several people commented. Yes, I acknowledged, recognizing that others felt this assignment was something special.

When I arrived in Atlanta on a Wednesday afternoon, I realized that I had no idea how I was going to find Ebenezer. Having no directions to the church itself, I headed into the heart of the city and drove around and around until I stumbled upon Auburn Avenue. As I began to drive down the street, I suddenly realized that everyone on Auburn Avenue was black, and I felt eyes looking at me from all directions, asking the hard question, What are you doing here?

I had to drive very slowly so I could read numbers, which attracted even more attention, but I kept going, saying to myself, “This is where I belong. Yes, Brewster gets Ebenezer. This is my home for the summer.” All at once I found myself in front of the church. I parked, straightened my tie, and then, closing the car door behind me, I walked up the steps into Ebenezer Baptist Church.