



# The Woolworth Sit-Ins

By Sister Bessie Tatem

**Day 30**

**March 28, 2023**

**Read Psalms 137:1-23**

“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song: and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the lord’s song in a strange land?”

**Critical Race Facts!**

Lynchings based on minor social transgressions were a tool of racial control designed to enforce social norms and racial hierarchy. Hundreds of African American accused of no serious crime were nonetheless lynched for myriad “offenses,” including speaking disrespectfully, refusing to step off the sidewalk, using profane language, using an improper title for a white person, suing a white man, arguing with a white man, bumping into a white woman, insulting a white person, and other social grievances. African American living in the south during this era were terrorized by the knowledge that they could be lynched if they intentionally or accidentally violated any social more defined by any white person. Examples are plentiful.

**Today’s Prayer Concerns:**

Lord, thank you for the opportunity to stand while we sit. Help us to stand with purpose, power and persistence. In Jesus name, amen.

As a child growing up in Portsmouth, Virginia, there was a store, Woolworth, on High Street which sold everything from beauty products to all types of home products. At that time, folks called it the “Five and Ten Cents Store.” I always looked forward to my mom taking me there so that we could purchase hot dogs at the lunch counter in the back of the store which was designated for us, “colored only,” while the front large counter was for, “whites’ only.” I guess as a child, I thought this was the way of life until as a teenager, my mom took me by bus to New York City to visit family members, and I didn’t see signs for colored only and of course I saw integration in action. Maybe, this observation could be described then as a nation divided with segregation in the south and integration in the north.

Fast forwarding to the early sixties! In the south, four students at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University gained national attention. They were Ezell Blair Jr., David Richmond, Franklin McCain and Joseph McNeil. These four young men sat at the white only lunch counter in Woolworth located in Greensboro, North Carolina but they were not served, and store management closed the lunch counter. This did not deter those students and other students from returning each day to Woolworth’s lunch counter. These actions sparked a movement of sit-ins at Black Colleges and Universities in the south. As a student at Virginia State University in Petersburg, Virginia, I marched in support of the sit-in movement while several students sat at the lunch counter in Petersburg’s Woolworth. I called my mom to let her know my intention of marching. Her words were, “Be careful and don’t get arrested,” since she had seen television coverage of protesters being accused of trespassing, disorderly conduct and disturbing the peace. No one was arrested on the day that I marched.

These sit-ins, marches and demonstrations had a lasting impact on civil rights and led not only of eateries being integrated but hotels, means of traveling, etc. The building that housed the Woolworth store in Portsmouth is now Roger Brown’s. I am sure if walls could talk in this old building, they would say in the words of the late Congressman John Lewis “Good Trouble,” occurred in Woolworth Stores.

**Questions to Ponder**

Have you ever participated in a political protest? What was the nature of that protest? What was the result of the protest? What impact did that protest have on your life?

