*Were you there?* This was one of my favorites and the most heart-felt Good Friday spiritual hymns of all times. I’m sure many of you have heard and sung it many times before as well. This hymn invites us to stand beneath the cross, at the scene of the crime, as we gaze upon the dying Christ, completing the work that he was sent to do here on earth.

This popular African-American spiritual, whose author was unknown, was first published in 1899 out of the Old Plantation Hymnal. It was sung by the many Southern slaves who could undoubtedly relate to Christ’s suffering, agony and pain. It was one of the first African-American spirituals that was incorporated into the mainstream American hymnal with the Episcopal church. Since the mid 19th Century, this spiritual hymn became a household song of inspiration and hope, from the workers in the plantation cotton fields to the many houses of worship across the many racial and ethnic divides.

As one theologian summed up this spiritual that it “**put each Christian on the witness stand**” by challenging our faith and conviction. This hymn captured the pain, the agony, and the suffering of the dying Christ by inviting us to the scene of Christ’s crucifixion and his burial. Were you there? Were you there to witness all of these happenings?

The imagery of each stanza intensifies, as we sang through the various scenes of a horrific and gruesome murder of an innocent man. Here, we could feel the pain of the spikes that were being hammered through the wrists of Jesus. Here, we could see and smell the blood that was dripping off the side of his pierced body. Here, we could feel the ground of the earth shaken and trembled and witness the darkness of the sky covering the sun. Here, we could feel the grieve and sorrow, as the soldiers laid Christ’s lifeless body into the tomb. We were all there!

A number of years ago, I remember I was sitting in the pew just as you are on a Good Friday service. An Epiphany moment occurred to me. The words of this hymn suddenly became real and personal. I felt as if someone was whispering into my ears and into my heart, asking me, ***“Were you there, Samson? Were you there? Were you there when they crucified the Lord?”***I was left speechless and I didn’t know what to say at that time. I felt so deeply ashamed and helpless, as this spiritual was being sung. I couldn’t bear to sing any longer. So I simply closed my eyes and listened to the words that were being spoken and sung by others.

***Were you there****, when they crucified the Lord?*

***Were you there****, when they nailed him to the tree?*

***Were you there****, when they pierced him in the side?*

***Were you there****, when the sun refused to shine?*

***Were you there****, when they laid him in the tomb?*

***Were you there****, when he rose up from the dead?*

As I wrestled through these questions for the rest of that evening,

I remember asking myself, “what if I said YES?” If I had said YES, that I was there…Would I have felt more guilty and ashamed of how I couldn’t do anything to prevent all of this from happening? Have I betrayed my Lord and Savior for letting him die right before my eyes? **Would I have volunteered to die on his behalf or to carry his cross on my back?** Well, probably not! But that’s what Christ did for all of us!!! He voluntary died on our behalf and carried the cross on his back.

What if I had said NO, that I wasn’t there…Would I be exonerated from the feeling of guilt or shame? Was I too coward to face the harsh reality by running away and not standing up for my faith in Christ, like Peter did? I wasn’t there. I don’t know him. I have nothing to do with this man whatsoever. It would be easy for us to claim such alibi and pass those responsibilities onto someone else. Someone else put him on the cross, not me…

But the truth is, **we were ALL there! We were ALL responsible for what happened to Jesus on the cross, whether directly or indirectly.** And there was NOTHING, absolutely NOTHING, that we could do to prevent all of this from happening. This was all part of God’s orchestrated mission for the salvation of humanity – a mission that began at the manger when the Messiah Child was born; a mission that was now completed on the hill of Calvary.

The cross that Jesus bore was our cross, for the sins that WE have committed. The death that Jesus died was OUR death for the punishment of OUR sins. As the Apostle Paul wrote, ***“For our sake God made [his Son Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”[[1]](#footnote-1)***

WE should’ve been the ones up there on the cross…not Jesus. He was made the ultimate “sacrificial lamb” for the atonement of our sins. Yet this was all part of God’s plan for humanity. **Christ MUST die…so we MAY live!** Christ paved the way for us to follow, as he reconciled our broken relationship with our God.

As we are gathered here tonight to commemorate Christ’s ultimate sacrifice, we bear testimony that WE WERE THERE in Spirit. We remember what Christ had done not only for us, but for ALL of humanity, even those who denied him, rejected him, betrayed him, or those who have yet to come to know him. Christ died for them as well.

Each of those words or phrases that he uttered, were words of compassion, humanity, and love using his last gasps of breaths. It became more and more excruciating, more and more agonizing until he finally declared, **“It is finished!”** God’s covenant of LOVE to humanity had now been fulfilled. Mission accomplished!

As we meditate upon these “last seven words” of Christ this evening, we are called upon to relive those moments, even though we may not had been there physically, but we were there in spirit…in God’s Spirit. **Those are not just words, but they are the living testimony of our faith.** They are God’s declaration of love each one of us.

God has placed us at the center of God’s ultimate act of compassion. So that we may boldly claim that **Yes, we were there!** We were there at the foot of the cross. We could feel the anguish upon Christ as he uttered these final words. **We were there!** **We were there** when the heaven opened up, the earth shaken, and the temple curtain split from top to bottom. **We were there**, when the centurion confessed and proclaimed that “*surely this man was the Son of God!”*

**We were there**, when Christ took his last breath and surrendered his spirit. **We were there** when Christ washed our feet and commanded us to love one another as he had already loved us. **Yes, we were there** to experience all of these in spirit. We are called upon here tonight to share what we’ve witnessed and heard with others.

Friends, we live as Easter people in a Good Friday world. **We cannot celebrate the Resurrection of Easter Sunday, unless we stand face-to-face with God, on God's Friday.**There are much grieves, sorrow, suffering, separations, and pains in this world, some are natural and some are human-caused. Nevertheless, through Christ, God has come to us, even though we may be separately by more than 2,000 years ago and 6,000 miles away. Christ has reached out to us through his outstretched arms and reconciled with us with our Father. **Yes, we were there!!!**

It is through this liminal space and time between God’s Friday and the Resurrection Sunday that God draws us near. Hope is upon the horizon, but for now we grieve, we mourn, and we remember. What Christ has done on this night bridged our eternal separation with our God, as God speaks into our ears and convicts us in our innermost hearts. This is Christ’s ultimate act of LOVE for us all. May it be so…In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. *II Corinthians 5:21* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)