

Conley Memorial Presbyterian, Siloam Presbyterian and First Presbyterian Churches,
Good Friday, April 14, 2017

Were You There?
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys
April 14, 2017

Isaiah 52:13-53:12 Hebrews 10:16-25 Mark 15:1-39

The soulful African-American spiritual "Were You There?" asks if you were there when Jesus was crucified, "*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*"

As Christians, the answer is "yes", certainly not physically but definitely spiritually. The crucifixion and resurrection were the seminal events for Christians since those fateful days in Palestine so long ago.

Yes, you were there, I was there, all of us were there.

Long before that Isaiah wrote of what would happen. Isaiah was spiritually there too. He wasn't a Christian of course but he, to us at least, was prophesying what was going to happen on that fateful day. The opening and closing words of our reading from Isaiah are the words of God as reported by Isaiah. The beginning is "*See, my servant will act wisely, he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many who were appalled at him --- his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human likeness --- so he will sprinkle many nations and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.*"

And the closing words are, "*After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sins of man, and made intercession for the transgressors.*"

God is presenting his chosen one, whom we believe would be Jesus, and says that he intends to exalt him through his eventual suffering. The chosen one will be misunderstood by some and many will be opposed to what he says but people will eventually understand. He will suffer and die bearing the sins of many. This does sound

as though Isaiah was there, doesn't it?

The remainder of the reading, the central portion, recounts the life and suffering of God's servant culminating at verse 53:10, *"Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand."*

Here we have a prophecy made over 500 years before the crucifixion which is almost eerie in its accuracy. Were you there Isaiah, were you there?

The writer of Hebrews in our second reading is unknown but may actually have been able to answer "Yes" when asked "Were you there?" He is writing to Jewish Christians to reassure them the Christ was indeed the great high priest who died for the forgiveness of their sins and who would return. He is assuring them that by Jesus' sacrificial death, Christ has opened up a "new and living way" by which we can be confident in approaching God *"with a sincere heart with full assurance"* of faith.

James Brashler in Presbyterian Outlook (August 8, 2012) said, *"It is indeed a cause for rejoicing and thanksgiving that the sacrificial death of Christ has opened the way to God for those who have faith"*, those who can spiritually answer "yes" to the question, *"Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"*

Our third scripture reading was from Eugene Peterson's Bible paraphrase The Message. This reading of Mark 15:1-39 tells of Christ's actual crucifixion. All four of the Gospels tell the story and are reasonably consistent with each other.

The story, of course, is Jesus' arrest, his trial before Pilate, the release of Barabbas, the mocking and scourging of Jesus by the Roman soldiers, and his crucifixion on the hill known as Golgotha or "skull hill."

A large crowd of people was gathered on that hill who could answer "yes" to the "Were you there?" question. The crowd included curious town's people, the high priests, soldiers, Pharisees and many others. Most of them were mocking Jesus.

"You bragged that you could tear down the Temple and then rebuild it in three days." Do it!

"If you are the Messiah, save yourself."

He was even mocked by one of the two criminals who were being crucified on either side of him.

Very few of Jesus' friends were there except for his mother and her sister, according to John's gospel, plus Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene, and only one of the apostles, the unidentified disciple that he loved, presumably John. Peter and the others had abandoned Jesus out of fear for their own lives and Peter had even denied knowing Jesus.

Very few of Jesus' friends and associates, only four women and one disciple, according to John, could truthfully answer "yes" when asked "Were you there?" Very few people who were there believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the son of God, but two who were there came to believe, a thief and a soldier.

The thief was one of those being crucified along with Jesus. According to Luke's gospel, when one of the thieves mocked Jesus, the other one said to him, *"Don't you fear God ... we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."* He then said to Jesus *"remember me when you come into your kingdom"* and Jesus answered, *"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."*

The other person who came to believe was one of the centurions who were guarding Jesus. When Jesus died, the centurion was heard to say, *"Surely he was the Son of God."*

The women were there, the disciple whom Jesus loved was there, the thief was there and the centurion was there. They were there in person and all of us, along with all other Christians gathered for worship today, are there spiritually.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen