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## *Were You There?*

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Were you there?

That's the question that the old Negro Spiritual asks.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Several years ago, Emory University hosted a traveling exhibit titled "Without Sanctuary." The exhibit displayed photographs and postcards that had been taken as souvenirs at lynchings throughout America.

I can still see those haunting images of limp bodies hanging from trees, and bridges, and hastily made scaffolding.

I can still feel the numbing sadness of hearing the victims' names spoken aloud: Leo Frank, Laura Nelson, Jessie Washington.

Hearing their names made me feel like I had known them. And I knew that, whatever they had done, they did not deserve what was done to them.

Each photograph seemed to be asking "How could this have happened?"

Yet, as I stood there in shame, I realized that many of the photographs were also answering that question.

James Allen, the collector of these photographs, says that there was one image that haunts him more than the others.

It's a photograph of a young man hanging from a tree and a young girl looking up the dead body and smiling. But, this photograph is not unique. Photograph after photograph capture smiling crowds of people gathered around the victim's body.

Historians tell us that most of these photographs were taken during a period when many blacks were beginning to gain some economic power, particularly in the South, and that many white people were beginning to fear that things were getting out of control.

The scenes in the pictures look like ritual sacrifices. It ends the same way that the ritual described in Leviticus ends. The people transfer their sin onto a scapegoat, and then drive the scapegoat from the community. The smiles on the white faces in the crowds were the smiles of those thinking that they had been saved.

Were you there?

Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?

The people standing around Jesus must have thought they had been saved too.

Think about Pilate. The crowd before him is full of people who have reason to worry about each other. The Jews don't all get along with each other. They are from different places and have different beliefs. Their leaders are afraid of the Romans and the Romans, in turn, are afraid of them.

After all, everyone is in Jerusalem for Passover. They will all be thinking about how God delivered Israel from oppression in Egypt.

To make matters worse, there is a growing tension between the political and religious leaders. Pilate and Herod each seem happy to humiliate Jesus, but, in the end, each seems to want the other to deal with him. One of them is worried about rebellion and the other is worried about repression. But, both of them are worried about becoming the target of an angry mob bent on revenge.

Just as it appears that no one is safe, they think they have found a way to save themselves.

The crowd has turned itself into a mob. The soldiers are pushing in on the people and they are pushing back.

But, then they all point an accusing finger at the same person. They find a place for their envy, hatred and fear. They find a lamb to sacrifice.

Jesus is an outsider. He probably looks a little different, and talks a little different. And, he's doing dangerous things.

He's taking on both the church and the state in ways that are putting them all at risk. If they can get rid of him, then they can get rid of the problem.

And they do. They sacrifice him.

Were you there?

Were you there when they pierced him in the side?

People have been using sacrifice to stop violence ever since the foundation of the world.

Sometimes we don't even know that we are doing it. Sometimes we do, but like Caiaphas figure it's better to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.

You can see it in myth when Oedipus is expelled from Thebes for killing his father and becoming too familiar with his mother.

You can see it in the Hebrew Scriptures when Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery for becoming their father's favorite.

You can see it in history when we burned witches at the stake for casting evil spells on others.

It works so well, in fact, that you start to wonder whenever you see a really tight-knit group of people who it is that they're against.

There is an old joke in church development circles that claims the first step toward really solid growth is to be clear about who you are going to exclude!

You begin to understand why the awkward kid on the playground who thinks that he is at risk of being the target is so eager to throw the first punch when the bully starts picking on someone else.

You begin to get a sense of why Martin Luther King, Jr. contemplated his death in the speech he gave on the eve of his assassination.

You begin to picture what Jesus must have seen as he turned his face toward Jerusalem.

Sacrifice works, at least for awhile. But, it shouldn't happen.

Christ, after all, was innocent. He didn't do the things that they accused him of doing.

Judas realizes it and brings back the thirty pieces of silver.

Pilate realizes it as he attempts to give the crowd Barabbas.

The thief crucified with Jesus realizes it even as he acknowledges his own guilt.

The centurion at the cross realizes it as he watches Jesus die.

Were you there?

Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?

Sacrifice depends on our forgetting. It's kind of like a magic trick. It doesn't really work if you remember the sleight of hand.

That's why we say that the death of Jesus is the sacrifice to end all sacrifice. It's harder to get drawn into the act when you remember all of the other times that this has happened. It's harder to get drawn into the act when you keep seeing Jesus in the face of the one accused.

Whatever the accused has done, you know that he doesn't deserve what it about to be done to him.

This is why we say that "we are redeemed by his blood." We mean that the death of Jesus points to a way of life that doesn't depend on death. We have found a way to live that doesn't depend on the accusations of the mob, and the complicity of those in power. We have found a way to be together that doesn't require us to exclude anybody.

Were you there? That's the question that the old Negro Spiritual asks.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Now that we realize it was Jesus we saw in the face of the one accused, we have to say "Yes. Yes, we were there." Maybe we were the one accused. Maybe we were part of the mob. More likely, we were watching from a safe distance or trying to wash our hands of the whole affair.

But, we were there.

We were there, but we never have to go back. We have seen the sleight of hand. And, we will not forget it.

The cross will always remind us.

The cross will always be the thing that stands between us and ever having to go back there again.

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You may be interested to know:

The photographs in the exhibit I mentioned have been collected in the book, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* by James Allen, Hilton Als, Congressman John Lewis and Leon F. Litwack (Twin Palms Publishers, 2000).

Although the interpretation of the Passion that I describe has been set out in many places (e.g., Rene Girard's *I See Satan Fall like Lightning* and James Williams' *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred*), the account I used and recommend appears in *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* by S. Mark Heim (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006).

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