

March 13, 11 Lent 1 Mt. 27:32-44

WERE YOU THERE?

THOSE AT THE CROSS

This morning begins our journey to Easter by looking back at some of those we know who were at the foot of the cross when Jesus died. Lent, as we are always reminded is a time to take inventory on the way we live our lives. It's a somber time in the Church calendar marked by the color purple. One person described Lent as "a season of soul-searching and repentance. It is a season for reflection and taking stock." In the very earliest days it was a preparatory time for Easter, when the faithful rededicated themselves and when converts were instructed in the faith and prepared for baptism. By observing the forty days of Lent, the individual Christian imitates Jesus' withdrawal into the wilderness for forty days." (See *The Apostolic Constitutions*, Book V, Section III.)

Plain and simple, it's a time like no other. Advent is a joyous time in preparation of the King of Kings being born. Lent is a somber time bringing back to our memories the death, burial and resurrection of Christ when the King shall rise again. From the cradle to the grave, to living again. On the mount of Transfiguration we know Moses and Elijah visited to prepare Jesus for this journey. They came to assure them that God's plan for salvation was waiting in Jerusalem. This was the turning point in their lives and each new day brought new teachings as Jesus did his best to prepare the disciples to continue to preach and teach about salvation, grace, forgiveness, healings and much more.

Lent for us is the same thing year after year as Jesus teaches again and again through his word about salvation, grace, forgiveness, healing, and eternal life. It becomes the focus of these 40 days of Lent, a time for us to think about the sacrifice that gave us the most precious gift ever, a close relationship with Jesus.

But it's more than that because when we search the stories we find people who were transformed by Jesus and received a variety of things like healing, comfort, peace and forgiveness. The stories might vary but the outcome is the same. They were people who were touched by the Master in some way, in some time. Some of them were among those who lined streets where Jesus visited, or on the mountain listening to his teaching. Some gathered in homes of friends as they ate and learned. Some people might have been part of the mourning crowd at Lazarus' tomb when Jesus called to Lazarus, "Come out" and he did. Some were part of the crowd that lined the street on Palm Sunday watching Jesus enter the city for his final week on this earth as people cheered him on, laid palms in his way, sang his praises. Then there were some who ended up at the foot of the cross because it was their duty. Toss in the religious leaders who were against Jesus, add a few curiosity seekers and you find people were there for different reasons.

No big altar call to come and believe. No big sermon. No voice from God "repent or else." No voice from Jesus saying he was innocent. No angels appearing. But just the same those 6 hours people were changed and for others seeds were planted because many began to think who was this man that hung on the cross and could ask God to forgive their sins?

So today we begin that journey with Jesus. You already heard our choir sing "Were You There?" asking us if we were at the cross that day. Our drama these next few weeks will focus generally on only a few that were there and we will hear their stories. There will be Mary Magdalene, the Apostle John, the Centurion, Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Peter. For today though, we just got a brief encounter with each of them. They remind us what it was like to be there the day Jesus died on the cross.

Matthew's Gospel tells us his account of who was there. Listen as I read from Mt. 27:32-44

*“Along the way they came on a man from Cyrene named Simon and made him carry Jesus' cross. [33] Arriving at Golgotha, the place they call "Skull Hill," [34] they offered him a mild painkiller (a mixture of wine and myrrh), but when he tasted it he wouldn't drink it. [35] After they had finished nailing him to the cross and were waiting for him to die, they whiled away the time by throwing dice for his clothes. [36] [37] above his head they had posted the criminal charge against him: this is Jesus, the king of the Jews. [38] Along with him, they also crucified two criminals, one to his right, and the other to his left. [39] People passing along the road jeered, shaking their heads in mock lament: [40] "You bragged that you could tear down the Temple and then rebuild it in three days—so show us your stuff! Save yourself! If you're really God's Son, come down from that cross!" [41] The high priests, along with the religion scholars and leaders, were right there mixing it up with the rest of them, having a great time poking fun at him: [42] "He saved others—he can't save himself! King of Israel, is he? Then let him get down from that cross. We'll all become believers then! [43] He was so sure of God—well; let him rescue his 'Son' now—if he wants him! He did claim to be God's Son, didn't he?" [44] Even the two next to him joined in the mockery.”*

John records it this way: *John 19:24-27*

*“While the soldiers were looking after themselves, [25] Jesus' mother, his aunt, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene stood at the foot of the cross. [26] Jesus saw his mother and the disciple he loved standing near her. He said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." [27] Then to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that moment the disciple accepted her as his own mother.”*

Mark writes:

*'At noon the sky became extremely dark. [34] The darkness lasted three hours. At three o'clock, Jesus groaned out of the depths, crying loudly, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" [35] Some of the bystanders who heard him said, "Listen, he's calling for Elijah." [36] Someone ran off, soaked a sponge in sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down." [37] But Jesus, with a loud cry, gave his last breath. [38] At that moment the Temple curtain ripped right down the middle. [39] When the Roman captain standing guard in front of him saw that he had quit breathing, he said, "This has to be the Son of God!"*

So there you have some who were there. I know this, and you know this.... we were not there. But really weren't we there? I believe so. Though we may not have been physically there we were there in God's mind. It's hard for us to understand that, but it is true. Christ died for the whole world. I guess if he could have God could have written down each of our names on that cross because he died for you and me. Think of it. We sin, Jesus paid the price. We call that grace. I told some of you last week that I sinned on the way to Florida and got a ticket in Ga. That state trooper didn't offer me grace, though I did name drop my grandson's name to him who is a trooper in GA. So I called Dalton Ga. found my price for my transgression and sent it on. I was guilty as charged. I sinned. I had to pay the price.

At the cross Jesus took my many sins upon himself in order that I might have life. In fact when I continue to seek his forgiveness, he continues to offer me grace, rather than punishment. It's the same for each of you. Christ redeemed the world, bought it back from the mean old devil that day on Calvary's hill. We should never forget it. Sometimes the world forgets what Easter is all about. We think it means spring, pretty flowers, warmth, changing the clocks to have more daylight. Like thinking of what Christmas means we

forget the true meaning is that on Easter morning the women found the tomb empty because Jesus has risen and lives today. We then shout to the world that “He Has Risen!”

There is a hymn that is not in our Methodist hymnal called “Jesus Paid It All.” Let me just read a few words from that hymn. *“I hear the Savior say: “Thy strength indeed is small. Child of weakness, watch and pray; find in me thine all in all.” For nothing good have I whereby thy grace to claim; I’ll wash my garments white in the blood of Calvary’s Lamb. And when before the throne I stand in him complete, Jesus died my soul to save, my lips shall still repeat,” Jesus paid it all; all to him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain; he washed it white as snow.”*

Yes, Jesus paid it all. From a woman who had demon’s cast out of her, to a centurion who stood watch, to the only disciple we know who was there that day, to his mother and to a disciple that may have stood way, way, way back, maybe not even there but in hiding, crying because of what he had just done, it was a day that the Christian community will never ever forget. And each year we relive it!

Friends, we were there. Not physically, but in each one of those persons gathered there. Sinners, rebellious ones, religious leaders who were hard headed and hard hearted to those who cried out to do a miracle and they would believe. The skeptics, the doubters, those who had little faith, to those who trusted deeply, some of us are like them. Even a mother who watched it all, and others who were touched by his love. A pretty tough crowd I might add. Oh, perhaps not more than 30 or so if that. But add to those who stayed those 6 hours or so those who passed by because this was a central route that was traveled a lot and perhaps many stopped for a while before going on their way never knowing the results of what happened that Friday. And then perhaps people like the 2 guys from Jericho who Jesus walked with after his resurrection were there. Such a variety. People that knew the savior. Some who belittled the savior. Some who hated the savior. Some

who loved him. It was a melting pot of people who God had gathered to watch and witness what was to happen.

Were you there? I think so. At least in Jesus' heart you were. You were there when he took on himself the sins of the whole world....each sin....for each person....past, present, and future. You were in his mind when he cried out on your behalf "Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing." Pretty amazing....but that's what God's amazing grace is all about. And in reality, that is what Lent is about. It's reliving, remembering that which God did for us. He gave us the ultimate gift. He gave us his son. No watering it down. No dancing around it. Jesus died to set us free. Jesus paid it all!

Maybe that is why my mind keeps flashing back to one hymn that seems to say it all, at least for me. It goes, *"Alas! And did my Savior bleed, and did my Sovereign die? Would he devote that sacred head for sinners such as I? Was it for crimes that I have done, he groaned upon the tree? Amazing pity! Grace unknown! And love beyond degree!....at the cross at the cross where I first saw the light and the burden of my heart rolled away, it was there by faith I received my sight and now I am happy all the day."*

Yes it was at the cross where I first saw the light.....when I heard his voice forgiving me.

May this Lenten season see each of us coming closer and closer to God thanking him for his sacrifice on our behalf. And if you have never done that, I invite you to come today to this altar and give your life to him....he awaits with outstretched arms. It's a great way to begin the journey to the cross so that on Easter morning you will give thanks for the victory!