

March 25, 2018 – Palm / Passion Sunday
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Mark 14:1--15:47

Were You There?

Were you there? we sing, plaintively, repeatedly, asking again and again, Were you there? Pausing only for a sigh and a tremble before asking again, Were you there, for the betrayal, the denial, the desertion? There for the nailing, bleeding, dying? Were you there? Musically, the question is left hanging, unanswered.

One could respond to it literally, negatively, coarsely, “I was not there.”

But anyone who has lived for longer than a song knows that’s not what’s being asked. That’s not what this song is about, that’s not what this day is about, that’s not why we read this story together, as if we were there.

We were not there, that day—but we’ve been there, any number of days.

We’ve been there when someone so very close to us let us down in a manner we can barely comprehend—we’ve been there when we did this ourselves, to someone to whom we’ve committed ourselves. We’ve been there when we chose short term gain over long term good. We’ve been there when we betrayed ideals. We’ve been there when we capitulated to fear. We’ve been there when we ran away from pain. We’ve been there when we pretended we didn’t know. We’ve been there when innocent blood was shed. We’ve been there so many days of late, when innocent blood was shed in school shootings, and concert shootings, and nightclub shootings, and church shootings, and street shootings. We’ve been there.

The astounding claim of the gospel is that God is, too. God was there. God was there when it didn’t seem as if it could get any worse. God was there when all was derision and darkness. God was there when the sun refused to shine. God was there, crying out in abandonment. God was there, hanging from the tree.

God was there, and in all our therers. That’s where God shows up, in the worst of it. That’s where God shows up. And there is our hope. As Luther might have put it, “If one cannot find God in the sewer, one cannot hope to find God anywhere, and will inevitably be overcome by the stench.”¹

God was there, in the sewer of the cross, and God was not overcome.

Three days later in a place that should have been rank with the stench of death, God’s answer was complete. Because God was not there, in the tomb.

¹ As quoted by Kathryn Tanner in *The Christian Century*, November 17, 2017 *Finding God in the Sewer*, <https://www.christiancentury.org/review/books/finding-god-sewer>