

Were You There? -- Tyler Merrill-Cranston

Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 112:1-10; 1 Corinthians 2:1-16; Matthew 5:13-20

Yesterday at the march for refugees and immigrants in St. Louis, there was a sign that read, “Things are so bad, even introverts are here.” It was Meg File’s favorite sign, because she was there, and is an introvert. This morning, I have to start off by saying that things are so bad, even the pastor who kicks off his sermons with squirt guns and children’s books is only going to preach Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

Can you hear the trumpets resounding all around us? They *announce* our *rebellion* and our *sins*, as our church and our nation flaunt their *righteousness* and carry on as if they *did not forsake the ordinance of our God*.

Can you hear the millions of refugees—men, women, and children—declaring, “*I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me*”? Can you hear the millions of Americans among us who are about to have their health care stripped away weeping, “*I was sick and you did not care for me*”? Can you hear the shouts from our penitentiaries, filled to the brim and overflowing with black and brown brothers and sisters, “If young white people were incarcerated at the same rates as young black people, the issue would be a national emergency”—or, in other words, “*I was in prison and you did not remember me*”?

Can you hear the bellows of Native Americans in North Dakota, “Whenever there’s a resource that needs to be exploited, our lands get taken”? Did you hear the voices of millions of women, all around the world, marching in January on the heels of Trump’s inauguration, maintaining, “We have yet to see the day when in Christ Jesus *there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female*”? Did you hear the voice of Miguel, our former sexton and friend, from the Seattle Airport refugee protest when he pressed, “Well, it’s no women’s march here at SeaTac...guess this one’s not about white folks”—or, in other words, *Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day!*?

Can you hear the voices of the immigrants among us, along with the children of immigrants, as our nation in madness rushes to deport anyone who is not Christian and European, and construct a massive wall to reinforce the grand distinction: “Remember the commandment of the Lord: *The foreigner among you must be treated as your native-born, Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt*.” Can you hear the gasps from black men, “I can’t breathe! Stop killing us!”? Can you hear the trumpets resounding all around us ... as Christ is nailed upon the tree?

The rulers of our age cannot hear, nor see, nor understand. If they could, they would not be crucifying the Lord of glory.

But through the Spirit, God has opened our ears, so that we may *understand the gifts bestowed on us by God*—the gifts of the immigrant, the refugee, the sick, the homeless, the prisoner, the Muslim, the Native American, the African American. And what a terrible sadness we feel, as we watch day in and day out as these gifts of God are shot and killed during traffic stops, torn apart from their families without warning through deportations and visa bans, and drowned in the Mediterranean sea.

I’d like to sing a song together. Could you all turn to song #170 in the red hymnal, “Were You There?”

Now Rick has told me half a dozen times that it’s fine if you want to change something in a service, but it’s going to take everybody five minutes to process the fact that you’re changing something, and in that time, they will not hear anything you say. So please begin processing now that we’re going to sing this song together. I’d like you to be able to participate fully in singing, so while you’re getting over that, I’ll say a few things that I can live without you hearing. Oh, and I don’t

have much to say after the song, so you can scratch off worrying over how long the sermon is going to last.

Okay. Eric and I attended the Mennonite Music Conference a few weeks ago, which was at a camp in the Pennsylvania mountains. As soon as I walked in the door a woman greeted me and asked, “So is this your sixth or tenth time here?” The conference has been happening annually for about 30 years, and it just so happened that Ken, the choral director who started it decades ago, was retiring from his leadership position this year.

In his introduction to this song, Ken told us that in all his life as a musician, he has never heard anything musically like the “O!” that begins its third line. The only explanation he could think of, for how it came to be, was the experience of African American mothers as they witnessed the lynchings of their children in towns across our country.

So when we sing this together, I’d like you to make the “O!” as big and full as you can. Sing it from somewhere deep within your soul. We’re also going to take our time singing this, perhaps much slower than you’ve sung it before—not to manipulate your emotions, but to help you to hear the great depth of emotion that already lies within the song, and that came from the voices who handed it on to us.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when they crucified my Lord? O! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble. Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when they nailed him to the tree? Were you there when they nailed him to the tree? O! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble. Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?

Were you there when they laid him in the tomb? Were you there when they laid him in the tomb? O! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble. Were you there when they laid him in the tomb? No, I wasn’t there. I read about it in the Bible, or saw it in a video on Facebook, or read about it in an article. No, I certainly was not there when he was nailed to the tree, or shot in the car, or murdered in the mosque, or the church, or the bar.

The march for refugees yesterday began with a handful of speeches, one from a Hispanic mother, which she addressed to people of privilege. She told us that she wept this past week when her husband didn’t answer his cell phone, because she was afraid he must have gotten detained and deported back to Mexico. She said she feels the same fear every time her children go out in the car: what if they get pulled over?—a fear she told us she shares with the black mother, who is afraid that if her kids get stopped for a broken headlight, they might be shot and killed. At that point, a black woman standing beside us started weeping. These are the women who have been there “when they crucified our Lord”—in a way I have never even imagined.

The speech continued, “To those of you with privilege, you may not lead us. Only we can lead us. But you may walk alongside us.”

And so we must continue to follow the lead of our sisters and brothers who live without privilege, who are there when our Lord is crucified, who teach us to sing “Sometimes it causes me to tremble” and to say “Black Lives Matter”, to kneel during the national anthem, to march in the streets, to call our representatives and resist, to welcome the stranger, and to *bring the homeless poor* into our homes instead of building enormous walls to *hide ourselves from our own kin*.

The trumpets are resounding all around us. Lord, have mercy.