

## **Were You There**

(African-American Spiritual)

History of the Hymn from Discipleship Ministries UMC

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-were-you-there>

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

*Oh! sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.*

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

This song is used during Lent for Christian communities and in the season of Struggle and Lament for the Freedom Church of the Poor. This is a season where we follow Biblical stories that express longing, mourning, and even anger at the way things are. Over 700 people die every day in the United States due to poverty. Millions of people in the U.S. die each year from inadequate healthcare. Crises of pandemics, state sanctioned violence, storms and other disasters disproportionately affect the poor and people of color. In the richest country in human history, there are 140 million people who are poor or one emergency from economic ruin. These are our people, our leaders, our families and we must mourn and wail and cry out to God for justice. The season of “Struggle & Lament” parallels the season of Lent in many Christian traditions and, also, is a season in which the poor and dispossessed lament our struggles and call for the repentance of those who pursue policies and systems that are killing us.

This Lenten season (Struggle and Lament) each of our Sunday services will focus on one of the final days of the last week of Jesus’ life. Each of these final days hold deep insights about the “way” that was revealed through Jesus’ life, his ministry, suffering, death, and ultimately, resurrection. This way leads to direct confrontation with a system of domination. It leads to violence and death, but it also leads to clarity about how we get organized and fight meaningfully and effectively for God’s promise of justice, love, and abundance for all. As the Freedom Church of the Poor we will gather for these seven Sundays to learn how to organize against the forces arrayed against our people today and to refine our tactics and strategy for building a broad social movement. We also gather as a political and spiritual community to sing, to lament, to pray, and to strengthen our collectivity by holding and caring for each other.

*\*We draw primarily from the account of Jesus’ last week as it is written in the Gospel of Mark and use Borg & Crossan’s book, “Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’s Final Days in Jerusalem” as a guiding framework for this season.*

### **Alternative lyrics that have been written:**

Rogers from Picture the Homeless:

Were you there when they buried all the poor

(This lyric came during PTH's Potter's Field Campaign - that fought to recognize and counter how the dignity denied to unhoused people in life was also denied in death when people are buried in mass, unmarked graves and family and friends cannot visit their burial place)

As we re-write the lyrics - how can we think about the crosses our people are forced to bear today? The death-dealing realities that empire inflicts on our communities?  
How does this song remind us that God is on the side of the poor and oppressed, that God is with us? This is not about redemptive suffering but calling out empire and building a movement that rejects such suffering and strives to build a world free from suffering.

### **Add Alternative Lyrics Below**

Immigration

Were you there when they ripped us from our homes?

Were you there when they sent us down to ICE?

Were you there when they came into our church? (about the denial of sanctuary)

Healthcare

**Were you there when they left us sick to die?**

**Were you there when they denied us our care?**

Were you there when they let our children die?

Homelessness

Were you there when they crushed up all our homes?

**Were you there when they closed the shelters down?**

**Were you there when they locked us out of church?**

**Were you out with us on the freezing nights?**

**Were you out with us on the blazing days?**

Were you there in the tents all down the streets?

Gender/Sexuality

Were you there when they targeted our kids?

**Were you there when they made our love a crime?**

**Were you there when they said our kind should die?**

Gaza / Sudan / Congo (war and genocide)

**Were you there when they bombed all of our homes?**

**Were you there when they destroyed all our towns?**

**Were you there when they killed our children?**