

Were You There? Sermon Series
The Centurion
March 30, 2025
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One of my favorite cartoons from this time of year shows a guy at a table that has on it a cross, a Jesus figurine, and a few nails. The man is holding a hammer and the caption says, “Father Murphy was no longer sure he should have bought his new crucifix from IKEA.” Yikes.

I wonder what it would have been like to actually witness the crucifixion. Many moviemakers and playwrights have tried, with varying degrees of violence and success. But no modern passion play or computer-enhanced execution scene can capture the actual event on Golgotha, the sights and sounds and raw emotion. To the eyewitnesses, it must have been so solemn, so heart-wrenching, so life-changing.

Except for one eyewitness. For him, this wasn’t the crucifixion of Jesus. This wasn’t the death of the Messiah. It was another day at work. It wasn’t Good Friday. It wasn’t a bad Friday. It was just Friday. For the centurion, there was nothing supernatural going on at Golgotha; it was simply the execution of three more criminals. He’d done this before, hundreds, maybe thousands of times. Drag them to the hill. Nail them to the cross. Watch them die. Next. And yet Mark tells us, “When the centurion saw how Jesus died...”

At the beginning of the day we now know as Good Friday, this Jesus wasn’t anyone special to the centurion. He probably looked the other way when the soldiers mocked Jesus and embedded the crown of thorns into his head. They were just having a little fun. Doesn’t really matter. That guy would be dead soon, anyway. When the time came for the crucifixion, he probably nailed Jesus to the cross like he was hanging a picture in his living room. Thump, thump, thump, through skin and bone. Just another criminal.

Why should the centurion care? His life had been full of these violent vignettes. The centurion was a ranking officer in the Roman army, in command of a group of 100 men. He would have been a career soldier, well-paid and well-regarded within the Roman Empire. He had probably fought in many battles, seen many men die, probably killed a bunch by his own hand. So this day was no different. This wasn’t murder; this was work, and not particularly desirable work at that. And yet, “when the centurion saw how Jesus died...”

Imagine what he had to put up with as he did his job, as he gave those criminals what they deserved by pegging their hands and feet to 2x4s with metal spikes. The centurion probably endured a lot of shouting and cursing. Pleading. Anger. Threats of violence. He’d heard it all before. He knew what to expect. What would this one do, this one who got the crowds all worked up a week ago? Would he curse at him? Spit in his face? Try to kick him or gouge his eyes? Plead for mercy or offer a bribe? Not sure, but it will be one of those. They all do something.

And yet, as the nails went through his hands –thump, thump, thump – there was nothing. As the spikes splintered the bones in his feet – nothing. What did the centurion see in Jesus’ eyes? It wasn’t hate or anger. Mark says, “When he saw how he died...” What did he see? What did he hear? What touched the heart of this hardened soldier?

From the cross, Jesus speaks: “Father forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” One of the thieves being crucified next to Jesus says, “This man has done nothing wrong,” and asks to be remembered. Jesus says, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” The centurion was probably close enough to hear these words. How did these words affect him? “What does he mean, forgive them? Is he talking about me? Has he really done nothing wrong? The sign above his head says, ‘King of the Jews.’ Is this man a king? The crowd is yelling, ‘He’s saved others, but he won’t save himself.’ He’s saved others? How? From what? If he can save himself, why doesn’t he? Who IS this man?” What did the centurion hear? What did he see?

The centurion knew that most people took a long time to die on a cross. What the average citizen didn’t know was that they actually died from suffocation. Their weakening leg muscles were no longer able to support their body weight, and they slouched so far down that their lungs were compressed. That could take many hours, even days. But after only three hours, this man dies. And he doesn’t die the way most crucified people die. Usually they fade away, their breaths becoming shallower and shallower, their voices becoming softer and softer, until they simply...expire. If you weren’t paying attention, you might not even know they were gone.

But not this Jesus. With a loud cry, he breathed his last. A loud cry! Who would have the lung power to do that after three hours on a cross? A powerless death ends with a powerful cry – “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit!” - and when the centurion hears his cry and sees him die with unimaginable dignity and compassion for others, he says, “Surely this man was the son of God!”

That’s more than a spontaneous interjection or bold proclamation; it’s a statement of faith. Don’t we make the same confession when we join the church? I ask, “Do trust that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God?” “Yes, I do.” It’s the same thing God says at Jesus’ baptism: “This is my son, with whom I am well pleased.” The centurion didn’t visit the manger, didn’t see the miracles, didn’t hear the teachings. He didn’t see the way he lived; he only sees the way he dies. And yet what he saw was enough to make him believe. The Roman soldier, who’s engineered countless surrenders, surrenders himself.

Or does he? We don’t know, do we? His story ends there. We know nothing about what happens after this. What’s the next chapter in his life? We’d like to think he was a new being, a true convert. A man of war won over by the Prince of Peace. A career soldier rejects the empire he serves for a greater kingdom. But we don’t know. Maybe he writes it off as a hallucination. Maybe he decides it’s safer for him and his family if he acts like nothing happened. Maybe this moment eats away at his soul for the rest of his life. There are many stories like this in the gospels, open-ended stories. We know the prodigal son returned home, but did he stay? Did Zaccheus give back all the money he promised? We don’t know, do we?

So we are left standing at the foot of the cross, next to the centurion. We also hear the cry, we also see how he dies, and we have the benefit of knowing that soon there will be an empty tomb. And now we face the same question: what’s next for us? How will the next chapter be written? Will our faith, renewed each time we remember what Jesus did for us, take root and flourish? Or will it wither away?

For the centurion and for us, faith is not some stagnant, lifeless memento you acquire and then put on a shelf to collect dust. Faith is a living, breathing organism that

requires care and feeding. It's like taking care of a child. The responsibility of raising a child doesn't end when the child is born – if only it were that easy. The birth is only the beginning! Likewise, the responsibility of being a Christian doesn't end when we make the confession that we believe Jesus is the son of God. It's only the beginning, and it takes a lifetime of nurture and challenge to help it grow strong and healthy.

And that includes spending some time at the foot of the cross. We don't like to be there: all that blood, all that crying, all that anguish. Can't we just get to Easter already? The cross isn't a pretty place to be. But our lives are filled with unpretty places, Good Friday places: doctor's offices, funeral homes, the empty space beside us in our bed, the empty room of the child who's now gone away. And the only way we can survive the unpretty places in our lives is to see how Jesus survived in his. With dignity. With forgiveness. And most of all, with a faith that changed those who observed it.

I think that's what the centurion saw that made him believe. He thought he knew Jesus – just another criminal, just another low-life. That's what others had said about him. He thought he knew this man. And yet, when he really looked at him, he saw someone different. He saw faith in a way he'd never seen faith before. "Surely this man is the son of God." He may not have been changed right away. Maybe later that night, as he pondered his day, a seed began to grow. Or maybe a few weeks later, when Peter is preaching the sermon on Pentecost, the centurion is one of those converted. Or maybe on his deathbed, when he finally feels free to confess his true beliefs, he again calls on the name of Jesus. It's never too late, is it? God never gives up on us. Maybe that's what happened to the centurion. We don't know, do we? But we know he saw something that day.

Have you looked at Jesus? Not a once-a-week passing glance; I mean really looked. I know you know what others say about him. You hear it every Sunday right here. We may think we know Christ, but what if we allowed ourselves to see him in a new way? What if this time around, we didn't stand at a distance during Holy Week, we didn't skip Maundy Thursday, we didn't go about our routine on Good Friday. What if we really stopped, and looked, and most of all listened? What would we see? What would we hear? What would we say? How would our lives change? The answers to our questions are at the foot of the cross, and that's where we have to go. We have to spend some time there before we get to the empty tomb. That's where faith starts; that's where it started for the centurion. And if being at the cross allowed a hardened, faithless Roman soldier to see the face of God, what might be waiting for us?