

"The Cross-Eyed Centurion"

Encountering Christ, part 5

Mark 15:22-39

You are in the right place this morning. It is no surprise to God that you are here. In fact, God has been waiting for this moment, for you to be present in God's house, to experience God with this community. The people sitting around you are all here for the same reason – to worship God. We are here because we cannot be the church alone. We are here because we have good news to share, and we find strength and encouragement in this place. It's not about being perfect. None of us are. It's all about worshiping Jesus Christ.

I invite you to pray with me this morning with your hands open, ready to receive what God has for you today.

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the Savior of the world. You desire to enter every person's heart with your Holy Spirit and change us from the inside out. Help us to listen to your voice today. Calm the anxieties of our minds so we can focus on you. We pray this in your holy name. Amen.

True confession this morning: I really don't know what it is like to be a soldier. I have never served in the military. The best I got is that I learned to march in formation in band in college...yeah, that's not even close to the same thing. I have one cousin who was in the Navy, and one uncle who was a Michigan State Police officer, but that's it. And I definitely don't know anyone that ever served in the Roman army!

I've often thought that the mystique of military to us civilians was the idea that a soldier puts duty above all else. "Serve your country above all" – that is an ideal we applaud. In Jesus' times, they would have said, "Serve the emperor,

above all." So I am astounded that, out of all the people who witnessed this rebel, Jesus, dying on the cross, the Roman centurion, a pagan soldier, was the one who "got it." He made the confession that Jesus was the "Son of God." So I wonder, what was his life like? And what did he see on that day that changed his mind? If the cross changed him, where does that leave us?

Imagine for a moment, if you will, a young boy growing up in a prominent family in Rome in the first century. Maybe his dad is a senator, or even a soldier himself. He teaches his son the glories of Rome. He praises the emperor, calls Caesar "god". This boy grows up, proud of his country, wanting to serve, wanting to achieve some form of greatness for the Roman empire. That's not unlike a pitch from a recruiter today, isn't it?

The boy's story unfolds. He starts as a simple foot soldier. Works his way up the military ladder. Fights a few battles, wins some awards, and begins to take on more authority. Finally, maybe because of his toughness or his ability to handle crowds, he is assigned a hundred men, hence the term, centurion. Actually, it could have been anywhere from 80 to 1000 men. He gets his first assignment. It comes in an envelope with the emperor's seal on it. He breaks it open, and he reads...Oh, no. Palestine? Really? Why not Spain? Why not Greece? Does it have to be the land of the Jews?

Here's the thing about the Romans. Their army is so ruthless and effective, everywhere they go, they not only conquer countries, they assimilate them. Their customs become Roman customs, and vice versa. Their gods become your gods.

Everywhere, that is, except Palestine. The Jews here are stubborn. They are troublesome. They rebel. They refuse to accept the Roman forms of worship. Once, the emperor tried to set up a statue of himself in their temple...It got ugly.

The governor Pontius Pilate was sent to Palestine to squelch any revolts. He was a tough man to work for, but he got results, usually. Sometimes he was a bit of a push-over. He tried to appease the people. And it didn't always work. Pilate was under pressure from Rome to control this back-water, end-of-the-known-world Palestinian territory, and the Jews were mad. Like a bunch of hornets. Don't jostle the nest, or you're going to get stung.

This is the place our man, the centurion, has to work. Now, maybe it doesn't bother him. Maybe he has seen lots of carnage. Maybe he is actually good at his job, and could keep the peace. He knows what to do. Enforce the laws. Help collect the taxes. Put trouble makers in jail or execute them. In short, obey the emperor and don't complain. It should have been routine.

Then one day, the centurion watches over the crucifixion of a man named Jesus of Nazareth. He heard of Jesus. Supposedly Jesus was some prophet, some miracle worker, a hero of the common people. The centurion wonders about him. Jesus doesn't look like a hero. And the crowd? They HATE Jesus.

There are other strange things about Jesus. For example, Pilate offered to let Jesus go free, but Jesus said no. Who would do that? Who would choose death over freedom?

Then there is the crucifixion itself. The Romans' job is to kill rebels slowly. Make an example out of them. Leave them hanging for days, sometimes, right on the roads leading into the major cities. Let them know who is in charge, and what happens to those who dare to defy Rome.

However, to our centurion friend, this particular crucifixion feels different, even wrong. Jesus did not commit treason. He was not a rebel. Unlike the others, Jesus does not beg for mercy from the cross. He does not shout out

curses like the other empire-haters. Jesus even refuses to drink the wine laced with sedatives. Jesus wants to feel the full force of the pain. It is...strange.

Usually, when people saw crosses, they would hurry by, with their eyes darting back and forth, trying to avoid staring and yet fascinated at the same time. Oh, there were the handful of mockers, people looking for entertainment, however disgusting it was. But the people who surround Jesus, they HATE him. They mock him, taunt him, yelling, "Come down from the cross, if you can! Save yourself!" You see, victims were crucified just above eye-level, naked. It is the most humiliating, painful death you could think of. And these crowds are glad Jesus is dying here!

How could one person be hated so much?

Then, as Jesus hangs there, dying, there is darkness. Like a storm brewing, but without the lightning. There is power in the air, an oppressive weight, like the sky itself is leaning on the cross, pushing it down, loading it with a heavy burden. It is unnatural, to say the least. It scares people, but they keep on mocking Jesus. The centurion watches as Jesus speaks to the rebels dying next to him and to his family.

Jesus does not die like a normal condemned man. There is no guilt, no giving up, no begging. Just pain, and....something else. Like...determination. Or maybe it is hope. It is like Jesus knows he has to be there. He has to endure this awful death.

When Jesus dies, he cries aloud, "It is finished!" He does not pass out, like the others. It is as if he chooses the moment he dies.

I am sure this centurion worshiped lots of different gods: Jupiter, Mars, Apollo. Romans thought even the emperor was a god. Friday, the day of the

crucifixion, was the day dedicated to Venus. But Jesus wasn't like any of those gods. Seriously, what god would die at the hand of his own creation?

I believe it was at that moment, when Jesus cried aloud, that something clicked inside the head of this centurion. He realized that all the mocking and sarcasm was actually the truth. This Jesus had power, real power, but he was holding it back. Jesus had the power to destroy others and save himself. Yet he chose not to. Instead of saving himself, he saved others...by dying.

The soldier looked at everything he had experienced, the way Christ had been spit on, beaten, mocked, and tortured, and saw how Christ had died with dignity and power. It was the total opposite of everyone else who had ever died on a cross. There could only be one explanation. The centurion exclaimed, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" The God of the Hebrews, not the Romans, not the Greeks. The Real God. God Almighty.

I wish I knew what happened after the centurion made this confession. How did his life change? Did he leave the army? Did he join the early Christian movement? I don't know. But I do know this one thing: it is never too late to confess. It is never too late to acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God, the Savior, the Messiah.

The confession of the centurion is the dramatic climax of the Gospel of Mark. From there, the story goes quickly to the resurrection and the commissioning of the disciples, but this moment here, the moment Jesus dies, is focal point of the entire gospel. The centurion recognizes that something awesome is taking place. Jesus is the Son of God. So where does that leave us? What do we confess about Christ?

Let me give you three options. Let's say you assume Jesus existed, that he lived 2000 years ago and taught all the things that we read in the Bible. So, you could say he was a liar, a lunatic, or Lord. Let's look at each option briefly.

If Jesus said he was God and would save the world, but he knew that he was not and could not, then he was a liar. And that means he deceived everyone who ever followed him, including us.

If Jesus said he was God and really believed it, yet he was not, we would say, Jesus was crazy, a lunatic. If he really thought he was God, the Messiah, but was just an ordinary human, then he should have been put into an institution.

Do either of those arguments sound hollow to you? They do to me. "A liar"? Who would follow him? Why would his disciples die for what they believed, when they knew Jesus was lying? If they never saw him resurrected, their stories make no sense. And if Jesus was crazy, why did he show a normal range of human emotions? Love, grief, anger. Why didn't he rave like a lunatic when painfully nailed to the cross?

I can tell you why. It's the only logical option. Jesus was Lord. As the centurion said, "This man truly was the Son of God." Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the world could be saved. Hebrews 12:2 says, "For the joy set before him, [Jesus] endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." (NIV)

Do you know what that joy was? That joy was you and me. He died because he loves us. Jesus saw us, in our sin, in our brokenness, and did what was required to redeem us.

Whether you are military or civilian, Roman, American or something else, it is never too late to confess that Jesus is Lord. The centurion shows us that. Each

of us must answer the question for ourselves: who is Jesus? That is the most important question you will ever answer.

You cannot say Jesus was just a good teacher, but not divine. A good teacher isn't crazy. A good teacher doesn't lie. A good teacher doesn't ask his or her disciples to give up their own lives for what is simply not true.

What would you say, if you stood at the cross at that moment with the centurion? Would you look away? Ignore the whole situation? Would you mock, curse, and laugh? Or would you kneel, like the centurion, and proclaim, "You are the Son of God"?

How you answer that question will be the most important decision you will ever make. Let's pray.

Memory verse

Mark 15:39 – And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

Reflection questions

1. What was the most dramatic event you've ever experienced? Was it a natural or man-made event?
2. How has someone's death influenced what you believe?
3. Why do you think the centurion believed that Jesus was the Son of God, when others standing at the cross ridiculed and mocked him?
4. Have you acknowledged Jesus as Lord? What led you to make that decision? If you haven't, can you explain who Jesus is to you?