

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

January 31, 2016

“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, He has been waiting for this moment, for you to be present in His house, to experience Him 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. OK, 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!

But there is one thing about today’s scripture that fascinates me. Out of all the people who witnessed 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 him a 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 someone going into the Marines today, is it?

The boy’s story unfolds. He starts as a simple foot soldier, perhaps. 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 was so ruthless and effective, everywhere they went, they not only conquered countries, they assimilated them. Their customs became Roman customs, and vice versa. Their gods became your gods.

Everywhere, that is, except Palestine. The Jews were stubborn. They were troublesome. They revolted. They refused to accept the Roman forms of worship. If the emperor tried to set up a statue of himself in their temple....watch out.

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, had to work. Now, maybe it didn't bother him. Maybe he had seen lots of carnage. Maybe he was actually good at his job, and could keep the peace. He knew what do. Don't complain. Enforce the laws. Help collect the taxes. Put trouble makers in jail or execute them. Hohum.

Then one day, the centurion had to watch over the crucifixion of a man named Jesus of Nazareth. He had heard of Jesus. Supposedly he was some prophet, some miracle worker, a hero of the common people. The centurion wondered about him. Jesus didn't look like a hero. And the crowd? They HATED Jesus.

There were 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 was the crucifixion itself. See, the Romans' job was to kill them 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 was in charge, and what happened to those who dared to defy Rome.

But, if the centurion was honest with himself, this particular crucifixion felt wrong. Jesus didn't commit treason. He wasn't a rebel. Unlike the others, Jesus

didn't beg for mercy from the cross. He didn't shout out curses like the other empire-haters. He even refused to drink the wine laced with sedatives. He wanted to feel the full force of the pain. It was...strange.

Usually, as 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 surrounded Jesus, they HATED him. They mocked him, taunted him, yelled, "Come down from the cross, if you can! Save yourself!" You see, victims were crucified just above eye-level, naked. It was the most humiliating, painful death you could think of. And these crowds were glad Jesus was dying there!

How could one person be hated so much?

Then, as Jesus hung there, dying, there was darkness. Like a storm brewing, but without the lightning. There was power in the air, an oppressive weight, like the sky itself was leaning on the cross, pushing it down, loading it with a heavy burden. It was unnatural. It scared people, but they kept on mocking Jesus. The centurion watched as Jesus spoke to the rebels dying next to him and to his family.

Jesus didn't die like a normal condemned man. There was no guilt, no giving up, no begging. Just pain, and....something else. Like...determination. Or maybe it was hope. It was like Jesus knew he had to be there. He had to endure this death.

When Jesus died, he cried aloud, "It is finished!" He didn't pass out, like the others. It was as if he chose the moment he died.

I am sure the centurion worshiped lots of different gods: Jupiter, Mars, Apollo. They said 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. But 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. "Surely he was the Son of God!" The God of the Hebrews, not the Romans, not the Greeks. The Real God. Yahweh. God Almighty.

I wish I knew what happened after the centurion made this confession. Did he change his life? Did he leave the army? 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 died, is focal point of the entire gospel. The centurion recognized that something awesome had taken place. Jesus was the Son of God. But I asked you at the

beginning of this message, 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. If he said he was God, if he said he would save the world, but he knew that he couldn't, that makes him out to be a liar. And he deceived everyone who ever followed him, and our hope is futile. You could say that. Or, you could say, Jesus was crazy, a lunatic. He really thought he was God, he really thought he was the Messiah, and he really 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. Because he was Lord. It was just as the centurion said. This man truly was the Son of God. Through his death, 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 you. Jesus saw us, in our sin, in our brokenness, and did what was required to redeem us.

Here is the point. It is never too late to confess that Jesus is Lord. The centurion has shown us that. So I simply want you to ask yourself, who is Jesus? That is the most important question you will ever answer.

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?