

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Pastor Mark Gartner  
Sermon for Good Friday – April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2011

**Mark 15:39**

**And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard this cry and saw how he died, he said, “Surely this man was the Son of God!”**

Dear Children of God,

He was a Roman soldier, an officer in charge of a hundred men. Very likely he had seen men die many times before. He had witnessed his fair share of these cruel crucifixions. He was disciplined and self-restrained, hardened and unemotional. He was just doing his job, as he supervised yet another crucifixion.

But this time it was different. This time fear and wonderment gripped his soul, and he could not keep his usually emotionless presence masked in indifference. He exclaimed: “Surely this was the Son of God.”

**Theme: People of the Passion – The Centurion, The Astonished**

- 1. The centurion was unlikely to believe in Jesus**
- 2. The centurion was drawn to Jesus**
- 3. The centurion gives us reason to ponder Jesus’ sacrifice**

**1. The centurion was unlikely to believe in Jesus**

Had he not reacted as he did, the centurion at Jesus’ crucifixion might have carried out his day’s work without notice. He became involved almost by accident. The trial was conducted by others. The sentence was pronounced by others. He was simply a loyal soldier, helping to keep order and to see that his men properly executed the crucifixion. His men, in fact, were more personally involved than he was.

This man did not come to the cross as a follower of Jesus. To our knowledge, he had had no relations with the man he was crucifying and no feelings one way or another about him. His spiritual heritage was, more than likely that of an unbeliever, whose spiritual life would have revolved around gods and goddesses and superstitions and omens.

Whatever his spiritual condition was before this day, a more important influence was working in his life at the crucifixion. He may have been stationed among the Jews for some time, certainly long enough to have learned of their idea of a divine Messiah. He could have heard of the claims of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, and that the Jews wanted Jesus crucified because he claimed to be the Son of God. Then, the events surrounding the crucifixion moved him, the indifferent one, to confess what the Jews had denied.

What an impression those events must have had on this soldier! We don’t know what he was going through, but it is safe to say that he would normally have felt revulsion, not sympathy, at Christ’s death on the cross. For “the cross,” as one scholar explains it, “represented miserable humanity reduced to the last degree of humility, suffering, and degradation.”

To a Roman, crucifixion was a horrible death reserved for slaves and rebels. Roman citizens were exempt from this terrible form of punishment. Such a victim was the lowest form of humanity, hardly the candidate for honor and praise. No worse, no more humiliating death could have been thought up for Jesus. No one, least of all a Roman, would be expected to believe in him after that.

## **2. The centurion was drawn to Jesus**

But as the centurion witnessed the whole scene, he was astonished and drawn to Jesus rather than repulsed. He saw Jesus conduct himself on the cross with calm dignity. He heard the mockery against Jesus, including the taunts for Jesus to save himself if he were indeed the Son of God. He heard the words of Jesus on the cross, words of forgiveness, words of comfort, words to his Father in heaven.

He compared Jesus with all the others he had seen crucified, and there was no comparison. He saw the strange darkness while Jesus suffered there. He felt the earthquake when Jesus' died. A deep religious fear passed over him. He concluded that Jesus was not a criminal. Jesus was a righteous man. "Surely this man was the Son of God," the very Son the Jews refused to accept.

In that moment, the unbelieving Roman spoke as a believer. He saw in Jesus at his dying, what every enemy of Jesus from that day on has refused to see and has tried to deny: that Jesus Christ was God. That Jesus was the Son of God was everything the hostile Jews said he was not. There, under the cross, the Roman centurion, of all people, confessed that he saw the Son of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

## **3. The centurion gives us reason to ponder Jesus' sacrifice**

Oh, to see Jesus as the centurion saw him! Can you imagine yourself standing at the foot of Jesus' cross, wondering about the man hanging there, a man so different from the usual criminal? Would you have recognized him? Would you have confessed him in that moment?

Put yourself there for the moment, in your mind's eye. Jesus is wounded from the scourging, the spikes have been driven through his ankles and hands, and he hangs in torment. The crowd is hanging around taking delight in baiting him, mocking him, laughing him to scorn. A haunting darkness has enveloped the day.

You look up at him and what do you see? — a miserable wretch of a man who deserves only to be mocked and scorned? — a first-century visionary who is being martyred because he stood alone for some high-sounding, revolutionary principles? — a criminal? — an innocent man dying unjustly who is, in fact, the Son of God?

What do you see? Only one answer is true. Do you see it in the man? Do you see something in his face? Does his dignified silence in the face of mockery strike you? Maybe you catch his concern for others while he is suffering: concern for his enemies, for his mother, for the thief dying next to him. Do his words "It is finished" reveal him to you? Does the moment of his death — his cry "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" — open your eyes to see him for what he truly is, the Son of God?

Would we have known him? We can't say for sure. But we know that the centurion has helped remove the offense of the cross for us. Through him, and to his own astonishment, we learn that when a person comes to the cross of Christ without a preconceived mind-set, without unbridled hostility, he can see that Jesus, the crucified Christ, is the Son of God. God's own Son died on that cross.

The centurion's confession helps us see the good in Good Friday, because it helps us see God in Christ. His confession helps bring the light back into the darkness of those hours. That he is seen as the Son of God gives meaning to Jesus' words "It is finished." He did the Father's will for our salvation, and through his death he won the victory over Satan and the powers of hell. Because the one-and-only Son of God gave himself in death on the cross, we can be sure that his death counted for us also.

The confession of the centurion was correct, and we today still preach Christ crucified. Our message today is the same one the centurion was astonished to learn: The Son of God sacrificed himself on the cross. And what the centurion could not have fully known in that moment, Jesus sacrificed himself for all people. He finished the work of salvation. He died to give us life.

Legend tells us that this centurion, named Longinus, continued and grew in faith in Jesus Christ and even died a martyr for his faith.

We don't know if that part of his story is true. But we know that anyone who believes in the crucifixion of the Son of God, and holds that faith to the end, has a Savior from sin, death, and the devil, and, ultimately, has a home in heaven. We know that in three days the confession of the centurion had the stamp of heaven on it as Jesus rose from the dead. We know that in Christ we have a new life, eternal life.

So today we remember the death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, for the sins of all the world. May we always remember and glorify God and confess Jesus and continue in the faith unto eternity. Amen.