

WITNESS: The Centurion
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Matthew 27:45-54

Many Raleigh-area residents, perhaps, can relate to the Roman centurion in today's Bible story. His job made him move to a strange new land. Suddenly, he was surrounded by people who spoke a different language, people who ate unusual foods, people who dressed in crazy ways. Their social customs were highly peculiar to this man, and their religious customs absolutely foreign. The Roman centurion, living in Jerusalem, was most definitely an outsider.

Assigned to a battalion in the capital city of the troublesome territory of Judea, this centurion was not only noticed by others as a foreigner and a stranger. He was despised by everybody! As an officer in the Roman army that had its boot on their throat, the people of Jerusalem hated his guts. To them, he was the enemy. He was foul. He was an outcast.

How could it possibly be, then, that the centurion, of all people, uttered those words of acceptance and trust when Jesus died? "Truly this was the Son of God!" What did a Roman soldier know of God? How on earth did this man – who had nothing in common with Jesus or with any of the Judeans -- end up believing in Jesus of Nazareth as God and Lord? The man who commanded the soldiers to strip Jesus and pound nails into his flesh, somehow he came to accept that Jesus was God's Son.

How? Well, he watched. He listened. The centurion witnessed what Jesus said, how he acted, who he was. He saw Jesus look

with compassion on his enemies. He heard Christ's words of mercy and grace, even while he hung on the cross. The centurion sensed an injustice, perhaps. He probably recognized, early in the day, that this Jesus of Nazareth was not at all like the normal criminals who were crucified. He could tell that Jesus was gentle, a man of love, a strong spirit.

And, when the sky turned black for hours in the middle of the day, the centurion knew that something unearthly was afoot, some divine hand at work. When in the moment that Jesus died, an earthquake went down, and the graves were ripped open and several dead people came to life, the centurion was "filled with awe," it says. He was awe-full – awful scared, awful shocked, awful convinced that only God could make these things happen.

So all of these bizarre events led the centurion to faith; but one thing more made it happen. God reached his heart. Plenty of other witnesses heard and saw everything that the centurion did, but they laughed it off and rejected its meaning. God reached out to this centurion on Good Friday, though, and God reached his heart.

You see, this Roman soldier didn't know anything that he was supposed to know. He hadn't taken the new member class, or studied the catechism. He didn't understand about the promised Messiah, about original sin, or about the Trinity. This man wasn't a disciple, wasn't a church member, wasn't part of Jesus' demographic in any way. If anything, he was an enemy of the faith, an untouchable to God's people.

And, yet, God saw fit to reach that man's heart. God stirred something. God sparked something in there. Jesus made a personal connection with this soldier; and, like a dead battery

gets a jump, a jolt, from a live one, the Lord gave the centurion's spirit new life. "Truly," he said, "this was the Son of God!"

I love reading this centurion's story every year. It reminds me, as so many other Bible stories do, that our God includes the outcast. Our God befriends the enemy. Our God forgives the foul. Our God embraces the untouchable, and changes the recalcitrant.

He still does, you know, today. His Gospel isn't just for those who understand it, who study it, who live their lives by it. His Gospel is for the strong and the faithful; but it's for the weak and the wavering, too. If our God can reach out in love to a Roman centurion, standing on the crucifixion hill outside of Jerusalem all those years ago, he can reach out to anybody. And he does.

Are there centurions here, in our church today? Some who may not feel quite at home yet, those who struggle to fit in, people who aren't accepted and welcomed very warmly? Are there people in your neighborhoods or workplaces or schools who don't seem to fit the profile, who may not know anything at all about Jesus Christ and why he died on a cross on Good Friday? Are there people you know who, like the centurion, don't seem to be likely prospects for conversion at all?

God can reach their hearts, too. If God can accept me, if God can embrace you – sin-filled souls that we are, right? – is there someone else in this church that he cannot accept? Someone else out there that he will not embrace?

God does not care who or what you have been. God cares only about who or what we'll become. He wants your heart, and

mine, and the heart of every single outsider in the world today, to know the awesome truth that Jesus, his Son, died for us, died for all. God wants every knee to bow, and every tongue to confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord, and to say, with the centurion, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

And God wants his church – God wants this church – to be ready when Roman centurions walk in. The Lord wants us to be a welcoming church, an open congregation, a church that accepts people as they are and invites them all to stand side by side before the cross of Jesus. The Lord wants us to be a church that's reaching out, too, like he is always reaching out. God wants our church to be visible and active in the community, to be embracing and warm to the needy and outcast, to be always striving to break down barriers and grow the kingdom.

On this Fifth Sunday in Lent, our final witness has been the centurion of long ago. People of God, people of Hope, we are the witnesses now. May the matchless story of God's love for us in Christ live on in us for years to come. Amen.