



MORRISON ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

www.mzluth.org

April 22, 2011
Good Friday Tenebrae Service
Sermon Text: [Mark 15:39](#)
Pastor Randy Ott

The Centurion, The Astonished

Through this Lenten season, we have been looking at the people of the Passion, many of them that we've known quite well. The Betrayer. The Denier. The disciples that we've known to various degrees. This Good Friday we look at a man that we know next to nothing about. He was a Roman soldier. He was a Centurion. He was astonished. Beyond that we know nothing about him from the pages of Scripture. There are stories that are told about him that come down from tradition afterwards that he was a devout follower of God. We don't know that to be true. So what can we really learn from a guy that we know nothing about?

If we talk about him as being astonished, I suppose we can learn something about what made him astonished. This guy that was there was head of 100 other soldiers. I don't know how much he knew about Jesus before the day began. He probably knew he had the duty of overseeing the crucifixion that would take place on this day. He knew that he was going to have to deal with soldiers who probably got themselves through this complete brutality to another human being by drinking and carrying on because they had to do such a distasteful task. If it wasn't distasteful to them, then he had to deal with psychopaths, didn't he? I'm guessing it wasn't necessarily a day he looked forward to, but once again, we don't know.

We don't know how much he knew about Jesus. We don't know how much he knew about the Jewish religion. We assume he was a pagan as the Romans were and worshiped one of numerous gods. We don't know what he would have known ahead of time. But we know what he saw that day as he was there. What he had seen had to be out of the ordinary.

We listened this morning to the Seven Words from the cross as we gathered to worship. The Centurion would have heard all of those. I have to believe these were the kinds of things that he had not often heard if he had crucified people before this day. Someone crying out "Father, forgiven them, for they don't know what they're doing." Someone who says to another criminal that was next to him who had earlier mocked and ridiculed him, "Today he'll be with me in paradise." He would have thought it was the narcotic, the gall, talking, except Jesus didn't drink any. He had to be soaking all this in like a sponge.

Then the sixth to the ninth hour, darkness. He's crying out about why he has been forsaken by God. He's talking about committing his Spirit into his Father's hands. He's

talking about all these things. And from what he had seen in Jesus in how he carried himself and what he had heard that day, I think we can come to one definite conclusion about this man. This man who might not have known much of anything at all about Jesus, by the end of the day he was convinced by the Holy Spirit that Jesus was what he had claimed to be, the Son of God.

There is no other way to explain it. There's no other way to explain how a guy who would see someone die on a cross, a Roman soldier who would see someone die on a cross, would think so highly of a crucified criminal. The Romans looked down on crucifixion. It was the most humiliating way possible to die. If you want to know what the Romans thought about death by crucifixion, there's graffiti that was found in Rome of a person bowing down and worshiping a figure of a man on a cross, the only thing is this man on the cross had a donkey's head in place of a human head. That's what they thought about crucified criminals. It was offensive. It was the most humiliating way to die. Yet here is this man, against all reason, against all things saying, "This is the Son of God."

If he would have come down from the cross, we probably would have thought it, but the darkness, the words...that's what's amazing. This man who evidently had no use for the true God before that day now calls Jesus the Son of God. It's an amazing thing. It's an astonishing thing.

Think about all the astonishing things in our lives. Things that astonish me about God and about God's people...it's astonishing to me at times to see the Spirit-worked humility in the people of God, people I've seen that have incredible gifts that use them humbly because they want to serve their Savior and they want to have others know that truly Jesus was the Son of God. Sometimes it just makes me shake my head in astonishment at the gifts God has given to people and how some people use them in such humility.

There are days when you see people soaring on the Spirit's wings of faith, doing things that are just incredible, doing things like this man saying "Surely, this Man was the Son of God." One of the joys of the ministry at times is to see people serve their God.

But one of the things that never astonishes me...I can't remember the last time I've been astonished at my own or anyone else's capability for sin. I don't remember anyone walking in and telling me, "Pastor, I need to talk to you. I'm such a horrible person. I've done x, y or z, and I gasp or thought 'I can't believe this.'" Because you shepherd souls long enough, you see the depth of our sinfulness, and when you're honest and look in your own heart, you see the depth of your own sinfulness, and there's really no astonishment at the sins that we can commit. That's one of the sad realities of being a pastor, or I suppose that's one of the sad realities for you of breathing and being honest as you look at yourself and at others.

So to think that Jesus did this for this Roman Centurion and that Jesus did this for you and for me and for the entire world, that he endured the agony of hell on the cross, he

endured being forsaken by the Father, he enduring it all knowing that you and I would still hear his commands at times and turn our head the other way and walk in a different direction. Yet that's the depth of his love for us and the intensity of his love for us. He gives us the forgiveness of sins. He gives us the perfection that he demands of us. And he continues to do it again and again and again in spite of how often you and I turn away from him.

That astonishes me. That amazes me. Until the day I die, I hope that astonishment and that amazement at the love of God and the overwhelming nature of the love of God, when it's stacked up next to my sinfulness, I hope that never leaves me. I pray to God it never leaves you. And I pray to God on this day that as you consider the darkness of sin, the darkness of a church that's gradually darkened to remind us that it's our sins that killed Jesus, please be astounded that he loved you that much that he was willing to do it.