

“Truly This Man Was God’s Son!”

Mark 15:25-39

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Truly this man was God’s Son! (Mark 15:39) Do you remember who made this humble confession before the crowd when Jesus was crucified? He was a Roman soldier, the centurion who stood at the Calvary witnessing Jesus’ last moment before he died. The gospel of Luke gives us more description on this scene. “There were Roman soldiers who mocked Jesus and offered him sour wine and they were saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” But when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, “Certainly this man was innocent.” This is the ending scene of our Holy Week story and it ended up a sad story. What a great contrast between the beginning and the end it is! For a moment, let us play back our Holy Week story to the beginning again, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. As we experienced in the beginning of our service, as Jesus was approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road and the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully. They exalted his deeds of power and were saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

I find that there is an interesting point in this story. There are three different representatives: the crowd, soldiers and a centurion. These individuals or group show us their different responses and reactions about Jesus, the Messiah. As we know, the disciples and the crowd were the first group who had great expectations for Jesus as their Messiah but they were disappointed and turned away from him. The second group were soldiers. They were either indifferent about the Messiah or didn’t believe him as the Son of God. The third person was the centurion. He confessed that Jesus was the Son of God! What happened to him, and what was wrong with others? This morning, I would like to invite you to think about these serious questions: How can we experience God? And how can we accept Jesus Christ as our Messiah, the Son of God?

Let me summarize a story that I shared last year. The full story is that on a cold Christmas Eve in 1952, when Korea was in the throes of civil war, one young woman struggled along a village street, obviously soon to deliver a child. She pleaded with passerbys, "*Help me! Please. My baby.*" No one paid any attention to her. The young woman almost doubled up from a contraction as she watched them go. "*Please . . .*" she begged. She had heard of a missionary living

nearby who might help her. Hurriedly, she began walking to that village. If only he would help her baby. Shivering and in pain, she struggled over the frozen countryside. But the night was so cold. Snow began to fall. Realizing that the time was near to deliver her baby, she took shelter under a bridge. There, alone, her baby was born on Christmas Eve. Worried about her newborn son, she took off her own clothes, wrapped them around the baby and held him close in the warm circle of her arms. The next day, a missionary braved the new snow to deliver Christmas packages. As he walked along, he heard the cry of a baby. He followed the sound to a bridge. Under it, he found a young mother frozen to death, still clutching her crying newborn son. The missionary tenderly lifted the baby out of her arms. When the baby was 10 years old, his now adoptive father told him the story of his mother's death on Christmas Eve. The young boy cried, realizing the sacrifice his mother had made for him. The next morning, the missionary rose early to find the boy's bed empty. Seeing a fresh set of small footprints in the snow outside, he bundled up warmly in a winter coat and followed the trail. It led back to the bridge where the young mother had died. As the missionary approached the bridge, he stopped, stunned. Kneeling in the snow was his son, naked and shivering uncontrollably. His clothes lay beside him in a small pile. Moving closer, he heard the boy say through chattering teeth: "*Mother, were you this cold for me?*"

This story shows us the mother's sacrificial act of love for her baby. When the boy heard the story of his mother, he felt for her sublime pain, suffering and death. I believe that he wanted to feel her pain. Her sacrificial act of love brought him life and it was his 'salvation' for life. His mother's death was her greatest expression of love for her baby just as God loved the world so much. You may still question and wonder why God couldn't save us without bleeding blood or killing innocent Jesus. The story of Jesus' crucifixion is not the text of this answer, but this story describes how much God loves us. We are reminded and challenged not to waste the son of God's pain but to remember how much God cherishes us, loves us whoever we are. God's love has no bounds. The crucifixion was the expression of God's sublime pain and love for you and me and the world.

Let me share more about the crucifixion in Jesus' time. As we know, the Romans practiced crucifixion as a means of striking fear in the hearts of the people. They did so for eight hundred years. Seneca, a historian, said that if you knew there was a likelihood you would be arrested and crucified, it was better to commit suicide. Crucifixion was an extremely effective crime deterrent, since crucifixion took place along the main thoroughfares where people would see them. Victims were typically left hanging or their bodies were taken down and left on the ground near the cross until the animals were finished with them. The

goal of crucifixion was to inflict the maximum agony for the longest possible time. Victims could hang on the cross for days before they finally died.

Pastor Adam Hamilton gives us new information about the crucifixion in his book, *24 Hours That Changed the World*. In 1968, just outside Jerusalem, a “bone box” was found. The bones were believed to be those of a twenty-seven year old man who was identified as Yehonnan. The find has caused some scholars to revise their image of crucifixion. They believe the victim’s legs would have been bent and turned to the side so the ankles were one behind the other at the front of the cross, where they could be pierced with one long nail. Further study has challenged even this revised picture. The nail found in the heel bone of Yehonnan was five inches long. Between the nail head and the bone are fragments of wood that would have been pressed against the victim’s foot. The nail would have pierced the wood first, then the bone, and the cross, holding the victim’s foot in place. Looking more closely at this arrangement, scholars determined the nail would not have been long enough to have pierced both feet and penetrated the cross. This led them to suggest the victim would have had the feet pressed against the sides of the cross, with a nail driven through each. It is likely that Jesus’ legs were nailed in this manner; we know his arms were nailed at the wrists rather than tied.

Although the Son of God, Jesus Christ hung on the cross and died, none understood who were there. They refused their Messiah’s pain and suffering because they were not hungry for love. But they were greedy for power and prosperity. Why did God allow this? Let us remember today is Palm Sunday and also Passion Sunday. Crucifixion exemplifies the agony that the human being can suffer, but more importantly is God’s powerful love for his human creation. His heart ached for Jesus. The more important message was his love. The centurion’s confession that Jesus Christ was the son of God exemplifies the understanding of God’s power and gift of love. We have been given salvation in Christ’s death.

Who are we? Many people in our times are not interested in God. They are indifferent to God like soldiers and the crowd at the crucifixion. But the centurion was different. He understood God’s compelling heart and love for him. This is mysterious and hard for us to understand, but we can imagine that his heart was warmed and he could identify with Jesus’ pain for him. In this holy season, I hope and pray that we all are able to feel for the son of God’s pain and death and experience the centurion’s heart as ours. Amen.