



'Conversations with a Savior: The Centurion'

Lectionary 9 – Second Sunday after Pentecost
8:30 & 10:45 am, May 29, 2016
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

[1 Kings 8:22-23, 41-43](#); [Psalm 96:1-9](#); [Luke 7:1-10](#)

AT EASE!

I am the Centurion—the officer referred to in the Gospel lesson your pastor just read to you. She invited me to tell my side of the story of what happened that day so long ago, and I'm pleased to have that opportunity.

My slave was sick—desperately so, to the point of death. Perhaps another Roman officer would have said, "Oh, well—you just can't find good help nowadays." Perhaps someone else would have said, "No problem. The slave is a Jew and therefore expendable. Just bring me another one." That is certainly how I could have handled the situation. My authority as a military officer in the Roman Empire was such that I could remove the slave from my household, send him somewhere to die, and then purchase a new one. No mess, no fuss. After all, I was a busy man, with plenty to do, so I'd have been justified in taking such action. I needed a slave I could rely on.

That brings me back to that slave. I **could** rely on him. He had become, in fact, more than a slave. I cared about him. Perhaps that sounds foolish coming from the mouth of someone in my position. But so be it. He was dear to me. Loyal, hard-working. When he fell ill, I had to do something. Let him die? No. No.

Of course, the real issue was **what** to do for him. Never in my life had I felt so helpless. I, who faced sword and shield and never faltered...I, who pressed on resolutely in battle, even when outnumbered...I, who taught the soldiers under my command winning strategies when defeat seemed inevitable...I felt utterly impotent in the face of disease and death.

I moved into battle mode once more. If my soldiers had to march to Persia for a healing elixir for my dying slave, I would have commanded they do so. And they would have obeyed. But I knew of no such elixir. Instead, all I could do was stand there by the prone body of my dear slave, watching him weaken minute by minute, and I was powerless to change the course of events.

At about this same time, I heard of Jesus. The stories were incredible: a woman healed of a high fever, and a paralytic made to walk once more, carrying his own pallet home with him. Stories of this Jewish itinerant preacher whose words mesmerized and thrilled the crowds. Stories of how he changed lives of the most destitute and despicable—changed their lives to the good, like they had become brand new people! Granted, I had no first-hand knowledge. By the time I caught wind of Jesus, it was fourth or

fifth hand. But I began to wonder—was there a chance Jesus could do something for my dying slave?

And from what I heard, Jesus was near Capernaum. So I sent some of the Jewish elders to meet him. Don't look so surprised at that. I may be a Roman soldier citizen, and thus the Roman "oppressor" in the eyes of the Jews, but at least here in Capernaum, I had worked hard to establish productive relationships with the people of that faith. I'd seen other towns where Jewish zealots practically started riots, and the Roman authorities needed to clamp down hard, but I was determined that in Capernaum we would have no such thing. The Jewish elders and I made certain we worked together well.

And, not to brag, but I did have a hand in the construction of the local synagogue, contributing some much-needed oversight. The fervor of their faith—at least when not in the hands of the extreme zealots—was a beautiful thing to witness. I would not deny them opportunity to worship.

Anyway, as I said, I dispatched some Jewish elders to meet up with this Jesus and tell him of our situation. From what I understand, their conversation with Jesus portrayed me in rather flattering terms. I suppose they thought that bringing the concerns of a Gentile, as they called me, to a Jewish rabbi like him necessitated that they put me in a positive light.

Whether that did the trick or not, who knows? All I knew was that Jesus agreed to come with them to my house. I posted soldiers near my home to watch for them, and one rushed in to tell me, "Sir, the elders are returning, and someone is with them."

Funny—up until that point, I was still in battle mode, ordering elders, even in a sense ordering this Jesus to come and heal my slave. But the moment I realized he was actually coming, I became—I don't quite know how to say it—nervous. The only other time in my life when I can recall my knees knocking like that was when my immediate commander, the legionary tribune, came to inspect my troops. See, if the tribune barked, "Jump!" I jumped. If he ordered me to roll over, I rolled over. He had authority over me. And just knowing this Jesus was coming into my home—well, frankly, it made me feel just like I did when that tribune paid that visit. It was as if Jesus himself had a kind of authority over me. I felt almost humbled and in awe of his willingness to come.

So much so that I then began to question whether this Jesus should even come under my roof. I knew all about the Jewish purity laws, and how they tried to maintain what they called ritual cleanliness. My sick slave was a Jew, but he was living in a Gentile household. Thus I, believe it or not, would be considered unclean—I was a Gentile in a household that theoretically this Jesus should not come near, lest he become soiled by that contact. I tell you, my feelings were all a-jumble. So eager for Jesus to heal my slave. So aware of my "unworthiness" to have Jesus by my side.

Therefore, I made a decision. As a centurion, I've been trained to make quick decisions in the heat of battle. I took my neighbors aside and said, "Meet this Jesus where you find him. Do NOT allow him to enter this house. Tell him I do not wish to trouble him in any way, but that somehow I know he need only say the word, and my dear slave will be well again. Tell him I know what it's like to be in a position of authority. I say 'Go' or 'Come'

and my soldiers respond on the double. Tell him I know that in his authority, even though he speaks from afar off, he and his word will somehow still effect change."

Off my friends went. I returned to the side of my slave. Who knows how much time passed? Perhaps it was only a few minutes. All I know is that a spot of color came to the pale, drawn face of my slave. Then he smiled weakly at me, and whispered that he was hungry, so I knew he was on his way to recovery. My slave thanked me for my bedside care. I told him I couldn't accept his gratitude. I didn't deserve his gratitude. I was still standing there helpless, powerless. Instead, I told him about the one with power. I told him about Jesus.

Well, my friends returned to the house. They said Jesus marveled at my words they'd carried to him. He said he'd never seen such faith in all the house of Israel. I, a Gentile, being praised by a Jewish rabbi for my faith? Was that what I was feeling? Was that what I had? Faith? I guess I did place my trust in him. There was no other person in whom to place my trust.

Perhaps if I ever meet this Jesus, I ought to salute him, gesture in some way to indicate his power, a wonderful power over me, over life. So I came here today at your pastor's invitation because I wanted to emphasize by way of that story Jesus' authority.

I can tell you understand authority—you have plenty of authorities in your life. Maybe not a legionary tribune, as I had, arriving without notice for a surprise inspection. But I am certain you have similar authorities. Those of you who have been in the military yourself—well, I'd sure like to sit down with you and swap war stories, but suffice it to say I bet you came to swift and full attention when your commanding officer came into view, right? I'm sure you said, "Yes, Sir! No, Sir! Right away, Sir!" We know when we are subject to authority.

And many of you have supervisors on the job. Someone in charge to whom you must defer. You probably don't salute them, but nonetheless, you realize you are under their authority. They have the expertise in a particular field which makes you place your trust in them and their decisions for the company.

And the leaders of your government—I understand you call them presidents and not emperors—are elected by you because you believe they possess the power and skills to govern well. You place your trust in them to wisely act on your behalf. Apparently, you sometimes wonder who in the world you should even vote FOR, but still these leaders are placed in a position of authority.

But none of these authorities—not my legionary tribune, not your commander, not your employer, not your president—none of them have authority over every single aspect of your life. This Jesus alone has that authority. That is what I have come to learn and believe. I have heard his teachings, heard the stories of his selfless actions. He wants us to put our trust in him so he can lead us well.

I said earlier my instinct would be to salute this Jesus, the Christ, as you call him. I notice you have your own way of doing so. Clasped hands in prayer. Bowed heads in reverence. Songs of praise sung on the lips. Sometimes you make the sign of his cross.

Sometimes you say “Amen” and it seems to mean something like this, “Yes, Sir, it shall be so.” You have those signs of respect and love for the One who has authority over you. These are signs I think I’m beginning to understand. **God be with you.**

Copyright © 2016, Nancy R. Easton. All rights reserved.



www.trinitycamphill.org