



“Conversations with a Savior: The Centurion”

Second Sunday after Pentecost
5:30 pm Saturday, May 28, 2016
8:15 and 11:00 am Sunday, May 29, 2016
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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

1 Kings 8:22-23,41-43; Luke 7:1-10

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

I want to start off with a bit of an aside. I find it is interesting that in this weekend that we celebrate Memorial Day as we remember our military people, our gospel lesson revolves around a military person. A quick Goggle search informed me that Memorial Day has been celebrated for over 100 years, starting as far back as 1866. It began as a remembrance of the fallen Civil War soldiers. So there's your historical fact for the day.

But in our lesson today, we've got something interesting going on. A soldier, specifically a centurion, needed help. We need to understand more about this centurion for any of the rest to really start to make sense.

A centurion is a military commander. It was a position of wealth, political sway, social status & military respect. A centurion was a career man, one with military experience, someone who came up through the ranks. He would usually gain his social standing depending on how good of a commander he was. But simply by reaching the rank of centurion, meant he was a pretty sharp fellow.

Because the fellow in our story is in Capernaum, and has been there long enough to not only gain the trust of the Jewish leaders, but apparently as well to pay for the building of their synagogue, there stands a good chance that he was probably retired, or past the peak of his career. Capernaum was a trade center at the north end of the Sea of Galilee situated as a toll station on the Via Maris. That trade route that led from Mari, on the Euphrates River near the modern Syrian / Iraqi border, more or less south toward the Sinai Peninsula, and then westward over toward the Mediterranean. The reason we think he's probably retired is because Capernaum was never a combat post.

One of the things I find intriguing about this story, though, is his relationship with his slave. Slavery was different in the first century, and I'm not going to delve into the aspects of slavery in the Roman Empire (although I think interesting). What we need to focus on today is that this slave was, in all likelihood, for lack of a better phrase, his *war buddy*. This is the guy who went into the trenches with the centurion; this is the guy that made certain the weapons were sharp, the armor was in good repair, and that he was ready to go at the drop of the proverbial hat. So we can understand this care, this compassion, that he has for his servant. He is probably more than a slave, more than a

servant, more than an employee; he is a friend.

But that's not the only intriguing relationship this centurion has: he has also befriended the local religious leaders. He is apparently a *God-fearer*. We have come across this phrase a couple of times during our Easter readings. A *God-fearer* is a gentile who has heard about this God of the Jews, and has come to, at the very least, *respect* this God and the Jewish way of worship. This centurion has gone even further, in as much as he has built the local synagogue. Now, what that probably means is not so much that he physically built it, or even that he had his troops build it, but in all likelihood, he paid for the construction of the building. And consider how the leaders spoke about him:

they appealed to (Jesus) earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." (vs 4-5)

If you've read much of the gospels, you know that Jesus does not suffer idiots and fools very well at all. He's pretty astute at figuring out when folks are trying to trip him up, and he in turn lets them know that he is Not an idiot himself. So the fact that he is willing to go with these religious leaders to help out this centurion implies to me that Jesus trusted what these leaders were telling him – that this centurion was not trying to jerk anybody around, but rather, that he was “worthy” of Jesus' time.

Now we also need to remember also that this centurion is *Not* an ethnic Jew, but is, in fact, a Gentile. A good, Law of Moses abiding, Jewish believer could **not** enter a Gentile's home without *then* having to go through an entire purification process. And, once again, showing how up on his Jewish belief and custom this centurion is, he seems to be aware of this constraint upon Jesus (not that I think it would have prevented Jesus from entering the house, because I believe he would have regardless of the what the law said, because Jesus understood that the law was there to act as a guide on how to live with one another. If someone needed physical contact to be healed, Jesus would have provided the physical contact regardless of where that individual was).

But the centurion sends word and stops Jesus from entering his house. And his statement to Jesus is nearly a quarter of our reading:

"Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; ⁷ therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸ For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." (Vs6b-8)

The centurion makes a really good point: he recognizes his own authority, **and** he is able to recognize an even greater authority in Jesus. He knows that his orders will be followed regardless of his physical presence. He sees in Jesus this greater authority, and acknowledges that authority, and makes a public proclamation about that authority. And even JESUS is astonished at this man's faith.

And because of his faith and this conversation, the slave is made whole at the simple command of Jesus. The faith of the centurion is wonderful, and the healing of the servant is amazing,

But there' a second part to this story that I need to touch on. I absolutely believe that

Jesus heals us, that God makes us whole, just like the centurion's servant. I have spoken too many times with individuals, and been present when healing has happened, to *not* believe in that power of healing. The *caution* I need to add, however, is that almost always, that healing has been a healing of the **spirit**, and *not* of the **body**.

As example: some of you are aware of my cardiac adventures from almost a year ago. Things on the cardiac front are going well. I'm eating more fruits and veggies; I've cut out a lot of the processed stuff I used to eat. I've even tried to cut back on my intake of caffeine (which let me tell you, has not been pretty). But a couple of weeks after Ash Wednesday, I started having trouble with my legs: retaining fluid. So I've been working with my doctors, and we're trying to figure out what's going on. I've had different tests, and had my insides examined, and on a positive note we've determined that what is going on is **not** related to my cardiac system. It's something else. We simply don't know what, for certain. We have some hints; we just don't know what's causing the results that we can see with the various tests.

I believe that Jesus **can** heal me. I believe that Jesus **has** healed me. Yet, I want to be like that centurion's slave. I want my legs to stop swelling. If my legs continue to give me problems, does that mean I don't have faith like the centurion? Why **can't** I be on the receiving end of belief like that slave?

I believe that God **is** at work in my life. God is at work through the doctors and medicines and tests. God is at work through my encounters with all of you. God **is** healing me, even if my legs continue to swell each day. So, even if I'm *not* healed in that physical sense, I still have faith. I would go so far as to say I believe I have faith as strong as that centurion. Because I do **not** believe that God heals us – or does **not** heal us – on the basis of our **faith**. God heals us out of **love**.

We are healed in spirit, even if not in body. I think that centurion's faith would have been just as strong, had his servant not recovered physically. Because that is what faith is; belief even when things don't go our way. That is the power of faith as shown by this centurion.

And that is what I hope we can take away today: that *faith* It is with us, always. It helps us in our daily life. Faith brings us healing in Christ. Faith brings us wholeness in God. Faith brings us new life in Christ, and reminds us that God is with us in the building of a synagogue, in the illness of a military servant, in the waiting room of a doctor's office, when we're undergoing chemotherapy, or walking the aisle in the grocery store, or driving our car to work, or where ever we are.

God is *with* us, and God *loves* us, everywhere and always.

Amen.

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