

13 April 2011
Lent 5 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“The Miraculous Faith of the Roman Soldiers”

Text: Matthew 27:54

(Romans 15:8-13; Matthew 27:27-31)

We consider the final miracle which happened at Jesus’ crucifixion tonight, namely, the faith of the Roman soldiers.

Now, as far as the miracles that we have been considering, this one may seem the least spectacular. The darkness that covered the earth, the tearing of the Temple curtain in two, the earthquake, the splitting of the rocks, and the dead being raised and going into Jerusalem are the kinds of things that cause us to sit up and take notice. But faith? Do not let this miracle fool you. *This one may be the greatest one of all.*

Matthew tell us that **“When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, ‘Truly this was the Son of God!’ ”**

Now remember, these were the same soldiers who we just heard of. The same soldiers who mocked and abused Jesus in the governor’s headquarters. The same soldiers who spit on Jesus, stripped Him, and crowned Him with thorns. The same soldiers who then led Him out to Calvary, pounded the nails through His hands and feet, and then lifted Him up on the cross. Soldiers who had probably done this an innumerable number of times before. Who had grown hardened and numb to the suffering and torture of others. For whom this was all “just part of the job.”

But this one was different. Because of what took place, this one changed them. He was no longer just another criminal. **“Truly, this was the Son of God!”**

What had taken place to change them so? The signs, certainly. The darkness, earthquake, and splitting of rocks would cause all of us to pause. But perhaps there was more to it. For though we have been considering the *miracles* surrounding the crucifixion, there were also the *words* that Jesus spoke from the cross. Words that were not the words of a rebellious criminal. Words that were not angry, bitter, and filled with hate - like they were used to hearing. They heard Jesus say things like: *Father, forgive them. . . . Today, you will be with me in Paradise. . . . Father, into Your hands I commit my Spirit.* These were words of compassion, words of love, words of trust and peace. This was no ordinary man . . .

So perhaps the darkness that covered the earth but ended when Jesus died was a sign of the darkness of the soldier's hearts that was then scattered by the light of Christ. Perhaps the shaking of the earth was a sign of the shaking of their souls at the words of Christ. And perhaps the splitting of the rocks was a sign of the smashing of their hard and stony hearts by the Spirit of Christ working through the Word of God spoken from the cross.

So how blessed those soldiers who nailed the Son of God to the cross! Who were brought to confess, ***"Truly, this was the Son of God!"*** What had started out as just another day and just another crucifixion, turned out to be so much more than that.

And in the same way, how blessed are we who nail the Son of God to the cross with our sins, who mock Him with unholy lives, and who crown Him with half-hearted praise. For our hard and stony hearts have also been smashed by the Word of God, and we also have been led by the Spirit of Christ to repent and confess, ***"Truly, this is the Son of God!"*** Our Lord has not left us in our sin. His compassion, love, peace, and forgiveness are for criminals, Romans, soldiers, Jews, and all people. Even you and me.

*And this, truly, is the greatest miracle of the crucifixion - that through His death and resurrection, Jesus makes saints out of sinners, believers out of blasphemers, and children of God out of criminals. And this is why He came. We heard from St. Paul tonight that the Son of God came to serve us - both Jews and Gentiles - so that all people ***"might glorify God for his mercy."*** His mercy which caused Him to come and die for our sins. To come and die for we who deserve only punishment and condemnation. To come and die so that we may be filled ***"with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."****

Now, did the soldiers have a perfect faith? Did they realize all the implications of their confession? Maybe not. The apostle Peter didn't either, the first time we hear him make the same confession of faith. For after he had seen amazing signs, seeing Jesus heal the sick, feed the 5,000, walk on water, and still a storm, when Jesus asked him, ***"Who do you say that I am?"*** he responded like the soldiers, ***"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!"*** (Matt 16) But then in his next breath, when Jesus told him what this meant, that he would have to be crucified and killed, Peter said: ***"No way!"*** He didn't yet understand what being Saviour meant. He still had much to learn.

The soldiers, too, I'm sure, still had much to learn. But it must be significant that they make their confession at the cross, at the very dying Peter objected to, for which Jesus came. I wonder if they were the same soldiers sent to guard to tomb of Jesus? How appropriate it would be if they who witnessed the signs of Jesus' death

would also be the ones to witness the signs of His resurrection.

And we, too, have much to learn. Thanks be to God that His Word and Spirit have worked faith in *our* hearts and brought us to confess Jesus as our Saviour! But our faith is not perfect either. That is reflected in lives that are not perfect. And so our Saviour continues His work in our hearts and lives, leading us to repentance, raising us in forgiveness, and sending us out to live lives of love and service, just as He did for us. That we who have been given the life of Christ, be now imitators of Christ.

And so we have come to the end of the miracles. They have taught us much about the significance and meaning of our Lord's crucifixion. They were not accidents or coincidences, but signs, they we might know the love of God for us in Jesus Christ.

And so actually, we have not come to the end of our miracles. There is still one to come: *the one that came three days after the crucifixion!* But that is a celebration for another day . . . soon!

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.