



At Home Worship for Faith and Hope

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 14, 2021

Then Jesus uttered another loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain in the sanctuary of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. When the Roman officer who stood facing him saw how he had died, he exclaimed, "This man truly was the Son of God!"

Mark 15:38-39 (NLT)

* Call to Worship

"Son of God, Son of Man"

written by Kenneth I. Morse

He was the Son of God.
He was the Son of Man.
He came down from heaven.
He was born in a stable.
Kings came to his cradle.
His first home was a cave.
He was born to be a king.
He was a child of Mary.
He was the greatest among rulers.
He was the least among servants.
He was loved and honored.
He was despised and rejected.
He was gentle and loving.
He made many enemies.

He counseled perfection.
He was a friend of sinners.
He was a joyful companion.
He was a man of sorrows.
He said, "Rejoice."
He said, "Repent."
"Love God with all your heart."
"Love your neighbor as yourself."
"Don't be anxious."
"Count the cost."
"Deny yourself."
"Ask and receive."
In him was life.
He died on a cross.
He was a historic person.
He lives today.
He was Jesus of Nazareth.
He is Christ the Lord.

*Song of Praise

"How Great Thou Art"

UMH 77

Either Sing/Read the Song Below or Listen to a Worship Song

Opening Prayer

Lord, we come to you this day with so many things laying claim to our lives, our hearts, and our spirits. Open our ears and our hearts to hear your words of healing love. Prepare us to be faithful disciples for you. As we gather here, on this day of sharing, remind us that you have shared with us your most precious gift, our Lord Jesus Christ. Help us to model our lives after his messages of compassion and service to you and to all your world. In Christ's Name, we offer this prayer. Amen.

NO Children's Moments This Week

Share How You Can Present Your Offering to God

Make your offering personal...through a donation or an act of service...bring to God an offering of gratitude with grit! Lift up with thanksgiving to God for the ways He has helped you through these difficult days.

Sing the Doxology Together

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow; praise him, all creatures here below; praise him above, ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

*Bless you Jesus Christ,
Father's eternal Son,
One anointed in the Holy Spirit,
Creator and Sustainer and Redeemer of all things.*

*In unspeakable humility you crossed all worlds to become one with us,
and submitted yourself this day to be judged and beaten,
mocked and despised,
cursed and crucified by the human race,
embracing the hostility of sinners against you,
that you could reach us at our unspeakable worst,
thereby bringing all that you are with your Father in the Holy Spirit
together with all that we are in our terrible darkness and pain.*

*We betrayed and rejected you
and you formed them into the way of our adoption.
We despised and cursed you
and you formed them into the temple of the Holy Spirit.*

*Dying in the arms of our scorn you brought your life into our death,
your relationship with your Father into our miserable destitution,
your anointing in the Holy Spirit into our despair,
transforming Adam's fall into the bosom of your Father
and the world of the Holy Spirit.*

*Bless you Jesus,
all honor and praise and glory to your unspeakable love.
Amen.*

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

God's Word

Luke 23:39-43 (NLT)

The Word of God for the people of God...Thanks be to God!

Message

"The Word of Testimony"

Pastor Clark

...see below or go to website to listen online

Learning to Tell Your God Story

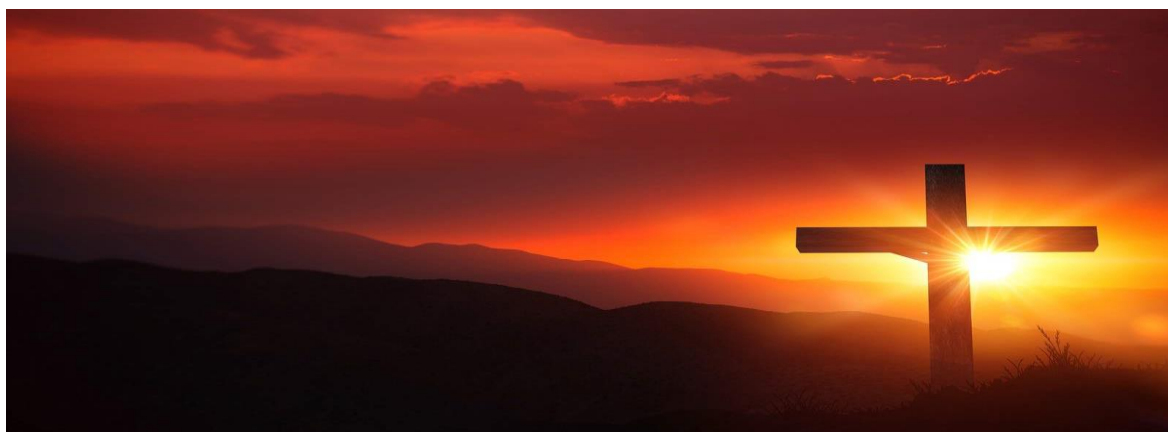
*Hymn of Faith

"Lift High the Cross"

UMH 159

Blessing

*Go into this week,
held together by the love of God
clothed with the nature of Jesus the Christ
reinforced by the strength of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.*



Word of Testimony

Mark 15:33-39 (NLT)

Introduction

The publicist for the late author and debater **Christopher Hitchens** asked Christian author **Larry Taunton** to arrange a series of debates between Hitchens, an outspoken atheist, and Christian thinkers. Over the ensuing years, **Hitchens and Taunton developed an unlikely friendship**. Hitchens stayed in Taunton's home, and prior to Hitchens' death from cancer, **the two friends took two long road trips across America**. Here's how Taunton describes what happened on one of those trips:

My mind goes back to the Shenandoah. The skies are clear, the autumn leaves are translucent in the early afternoon sun, and the road ahead of us is open ... In a strong, clear voice, Christopher is reading from the eleventh chapter of the Gospel of John. Reaching the twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth verses, his face lights up with recognition.

He stops. "I know this one too," he says. "I did not recall its connection with the resurrection of Lazarus."

"It's a great verse," I add, sensing we have reached a defining moment. "Yes, Dickens thought so," Christopher says, and then, taking his reading glasses off, he turns to me and asks: "Do you believest thou this, Larry Taunton?" His sarcasm is evident, but it lacks its customary force.

"I do. But you already knew that I did. The question is, do you believest thou this, Christopher Hitchens?" As if searching for a clever riposte, he hesitates and speaks with unexpected transparency: **"I'll admit that it is not without appeal to a dying man."**

At that moment, this outspoken atheist, dying as he was with cancer, became an **unexpected witness** to our Lord Jesus Christ, in that moment of transparency with his friend Larry. Today's passage highlights **a most unexpected witness to our Christ**. We find the story in Mark 15:33-39.

³³ At noon, darkness fell across the whole land until three o'clock. ³⁴ Then at three o'clock Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

³⁵ Some of the bystanders misunderstood and thought he was calling for the prophet Elijah. ³⁶ One of them ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, holding it up to him on a reed stick so he could drink. "Wait!" he said. "Let's see whether Elijah comes to take him down!"

³⁷ Then Jesus uttered another loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸ And the curtain in the sanctuary of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

³⁹ When the Roman officer who stood facing him saw how he had died, he exclaimed, "This man truly was the Son of God!"

In his Lenten devotional J. Ellsworth Kalas makes an intriguing observation: as we saw a few weeks ago at the beginning of our **Seven Words TO the Cross** series, the first word was that of mocking or taunting or ridicule. *“You saved others; you cannot save yourself,”* which was renewed in the passage we looked at last week: **“Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”** Perhaps Mark had a dramatic structure in mind when this week’s Word to the Cross is in essence an answer to that taunting question. When Jesus died, the answer was given! **“Truly this man was the Son of God!”**

The mocking crowd—the one thief, the passersby, the religious elite—thought Jesus should come down from the Cross if he were indeed God’s Son. But the Son of God must do just the opposite; he must stay on the Cross until he has fulfilled his calling, until he has conquered death by taking it as his own. The startling and unexpected surprise to all this is the **source of that dramatic testimony**. It was the Roman Centurion assigned to oversee the crucifixion! This centurion is the one who declares, **“Truly this man was the Son of God!”**

The only person a loyal Roman would ever call “Son of God” was Caesar—but this man gave the title to Jesus. After Julius Caesar was deified, his adopted son, Augustus, became widely known as “son of god.” This centurion transfers the title from the most revered figure in the Roman imperial cult to a Jew who had just been executed. Astonishing. It’s so unlikely that the centurion would proclaim Jesus as the Son of God especially having witnessed Jesus dying such a humiliating and gruesome death. We have to get to the bottom of this mystery. Who is this centurion? What compelled him to dare announce that Jesus—not Caesar—was the Son of God?

A centurion was a Roman officer. He was a professional officer that **commanded 80 to 100 men** (hence the name centurion or century). They usually led from the front, occupying a position at the front right of the century formation. Centurions were particularly hard men, harsh, disciplinarians, fierce, merciless, and loyal to Rome. This centurion in Mark’s gospel was **a hard man and was no stranger to death**. We can imagine this man had seen death and inflicted it to an extent that you or I could hardly imagine.

What happens to this hardened soldier that pierces his calloused exterior and changes his heart and mind about Jesus? We get only one small clue: **“When the Roman officer who stood facing him saw how he had died...”** Something about Jesus’ death captured his attention and ultimately his heart.

The Centurion witnessed Jesus encounter death as no one else he had ever experienced.

- The Centurion heard Jesus as he called out in thirst
- The Centurion heard him talk to one of the thieves dying beside him
- The Centurion heard him cry out to God for help
- The Centurion was stunned when Jesus didn’t curse the heartless ones who mocked him; in fact, this Jesus had the mind-blowing fortitude to forgive those who had crucified him
- The Centurion was taken aback when Jesus didn’t rail against the fate that thwarted his plans; instead all this seemed to be part of his plan

All of that, no doubt, played a part in turning this Centurion's mind and heart toward Jesus. But it was something else that this Centurion witnessed that pierced his heart. It was Jesus' great shout from the Cross. Matthew, Mark, and Luke only name that Jesus shouted out in a loud voice. It is in John's gospel that we learn the content of this mighty shout: "**Tetelestai.**" "**It is finished.**" I think it was this shout that shocked his soul to attention.

This Centurion had never witnessed anyone die like this. This was no common criminal succumbing to the final death throes of a brutal crucifixion. This was no resignation of defeat. **This was a great shout of victory! Finished!** This was someone who had just completed his mission. As a centurion, he would be well-acquainted with this kind of thinking. He took and obeyed orders. He finished tasks. He completed his missions.

Jean Jacques Rousseau, an eighteenth-century philosopher once said: "**If Socrates lived and died like a philosopher, Jesus lived and died like a God!**" That must have been what this Centurion felt as he stood at the foot of the Cross.

And so, the Centurion makes this dramatic declaration, "**Truly, this man was the Son of God!**" And he did so from the vantage point of his own life and experience. No, the Centurion probably didn't have in mind a nuanced theology of Jesus' incarnation, his sinless and miracle-working life, his saving mission, and his plan to birth a new creation called the Church. But he spoke from his heart, from his experience...spoke from what he had just witnessed. It was authentic. It was born of tangible human experience. It was sincere.

Let's listen in on Max Lucado's poetic recreation of the Centurion's experience:

*Suddenly the center head ceased to bob. It yanked itself erect. Its eyes opened in a flash of white. A roar sliced the silence. "**It is finished.**" It wasn't a yell. It wasn't a scream. **It was a roar ... a lion's roar. From what world that roar came the centurion didn't know, but he knew it wasn't this one.***

The centurion stood up from the rock and took a few paces toward the Nazarene. As he got closer he could tell that Jesus was staring into the sky. There was something in his eyes that the soldier had to see. But after only a few steps, he fell. He stood and fell again. The ground was shaking, gently at first and now violently. He tried once more to walk and was able to take a few steps and then fall... at the foot of the cross.

*He looked up into the face of this one near death. The King looked down at the crusty old centurion. Jesus' hands were fastened—they couldn't reach out. His feet were nailed to timber, they couldn't walk toward him. His head was heavy with pain, he could scarcely move it. **But his eyes... they were afire. They were unquenchable. They were the eyes of God.***

*Perhaps that is what made the centurion say what he said. **He saw the eyes of God.** He saw the same eyes that had been seen by a near-naked adulteress in Jerusalem, a friendless divorcee in Samaria, and*

a four-day-dead Lazarus in a cemetery. The same eyes that didn't close upon seeing man's futility, didn't turn away at man's failure, and didn't wince upon witnessing man's death.

*"It's all right," God's eyes said. "I've seen the storms and it's still all right." The centurion's convictions began to flow together like rivers. **"This was no carpenter," he spoke under his breath. "This was no peasant. This was no normal man."***

He stood and looked around at the rocks that had fallen and the sky that had blackened. He turned and stared at the soldiers as they stared at Jesus with frozen faces. He turned and watched as the eyes of Jesus lifted and looked toward home. He listened as the parched lips parted and the swollen tongue spoke for the last time. "Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit."

Had the centurion not said it, the soldiers would have. Had the centurion not said it, the rocks would have—as would have the angels, the stars, even the demons. But he did say it. It fell to a nameless foreigner to state what they all knew.

"Surely this man was the Son of God."

Again, note how unlikely all this would be. A crucifixion was Roman power on display. It was Rome's authority making an impression on the people with cruel and gruesome force. This was Caesar demanding to be crowned and worshiped and obeyed. But, even here, especially here, a witness emerges from the most unlikely source...a witness cries out in the dark wilderness of human sin, Jesus is the true King. Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is the Son of God. And that witness: shockingly is a Roman Centurion! Something gripped his heart so powerfully; he would elevate Jesus above all!

Above All by Michael W. Smith

Conclusion

Over the centuries, J. Ellsworth Kalas reminds us, many have followed in the footsteps of this brave Centurion.

- Some have given their witness and no one seems to hear. Perhaps the Centurion wondered if anyone heard him?
- Some give their witness and are dismissed as religious fanatics.
- Some give their witness in such hostile settings that they pay for it with their lives.
- And some, thankfully, give their witness to God, persuade others to take the same Christ as Lord and Savior.

This Lenten season, I invite you to come to the Cross anew. In your soul, can you hear that great shout of victory, ***It Is Finished?*** I hope you feel you too must respond. Your testimony must be given! Tell someone.

Extra Innings: Most of us shy away from that especially in today's culturally charged atmosphere. We make it far too ominous in our minds. What if we were to clarify it, simplify it, make it more authentically you?

What if you could learn to tell your God Story? Your unique experience with God. What if you could learn to tell it in a short, concise, authentic, and winsome way?

It is possible. We are going to tackle this in a one session life experience. You interested?

How Great Thou Art

1 O Lord my God! when I in awesome wonder
consider all the *worlds thy hand have made,
I see the stars, I hear the *rolling thunder,
thy power throughout the universe displayed.

Refrain:

Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee;
how great thou art, how great thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee;
how great thou art, how great thou art!

2 When through the woods and forest glades I wander,
and hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;
when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur
and hear the brook, and feel the gentle breeze; [Refrain]

3 And when I think that God, his Son not sparing,
sent him to die, I scarce can take it in;
that on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,
he bled and died to take away my sin; [Refrain]

4 When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation
and take me home, what joy shall fill my heart.
Then I shall bow in humble adoration,
and there proclaim, my God, how great thou art! [Refrain]

* Author's original words are "works" and "mighty"

Lift High the Cross

Refrain:

Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim
till all the world adore his sacred name.

1 Come, Christians, follow this triumphant sign.
The hosts of God in unity combine. [Refrain]

2 Each newborn servant of the Crucified
bears on the brow the seal of him who died. [Refrain]

3 O Lord, once lifted on the glorious tree,
as thou hast promised, draw the world to thee. [Refrain]

4 So shall our song of triumph ever be:
Praise to the Crucified for victory! [Refrain]

Above All by Michael W. Smith

Above all powers
Above all kings
Above all nature
And all created things
Above all wisdom
And all the ways of man
You were here
Before the world began

Above all kingdoms
Above all thrones
Above all wonders
The world has ever known
Above all wealth
And treasures of the earth
There's no way to measure
What You're worth

Crucified
Laid behind a stone
You lived to die
Rejected and alone
Like a rose
Trampled on the ground
You took the fall
And thought of me
Above all

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