

"A Word from the Cross: Understanding"

I am going to ask you to open your minds and unclutter your hearts, and lend me your imaginations for a few moments if you will.

My name is Cornelia. I am the wife of a Roman Centurion here in Jerusalem. But until a few months ago, we were living near the Sea of Galilee in the garrison town of Capernaum. My husband had a wonderful encounter there with a man named Jesus of Nazareth, which is why we were sent here. I am sure the Governor of Rome meant to punish him for his unfaithfulness to the king by sending us here to the city of David, the Jewish king of long ago. But because of that punishment, I too have had my own encounter with this rebellious rabbi. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I was pleased when my parents informed me that they had arranged a marriage with Marcus, a man of respect in our village and one very pleasing to my eye. Although he was a soldier, he was different in many ways. He did not have a cruel streak – a need to inflict pain on others, as some soldiers do. He DID have an authoritative presence and has always been a good judge of character. A good decision maker. So I was not surprised when they elevated him quickly to Centurion, commander over 80 – 100 men on any given day.

This has been wonderful for Marcus, who was able simply to command the armies without having to do so much of the real killing. Truth be told, he did not have the stomach, or the heart, for such violence. He often told me that he was glad that the soldiers were able to beat and torture their prisoners because many of them had so much anger. He hoped they got their aggression out on the criminals in their charge and therefore had none left to take home to their families. AND, it has also been wonderful for me because his status enabled us to have servants

in our home, to help me with the cooking, cleaning, gardening and marketing so I could pay attention to our four children.

But because he has such a sympathetic disposition, my husband soon began to treat our household help more like family. Which did not surprise me at all. He really is a loving man. And when our gardener fell ill, Marcus did a very brave thing. You see, it was about the time that stories were being told all over Israel about this man named Jesus. Stories about miraculous healings and bold acts of defiance to the religious leaders of his people. He seemed to have quite a following and also quite a mind of his own. Some Jews even claimed he was their long awaited Messiah.

When our servant became suddenly paralyzed with no apparent cause it just broke my husband's heart. He was really only a boy – barely fifteen – and I know Marcus was thinking of our own son, just a few years younger, and how saddened we would be if we were facing such a hopeless situation. So when we heard that this Jesus was coming through Capernaum, Marcus dared to approach him and ask him to cure the lad.

As soon as he spoke, Marcus felt he had done wrong. As Romans, we are to bow only to the Emperor so he knew he had not only been unfaithful, but that he was probably wasting his time. If this man were really the Messiah of the Jews, surely he would not help those who were not his own. But even as he spoke, he felt a connection. And Jesus said to him, “Shall I come and heal him?”

My husband was chocked and replied with humility, “Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed.” Yet, when Jesus heard this, Marcus said he was amazed and said to everyone there, "Truly I tell you, I have not

found anyone in Israel with such great faith." And before Marcus came home to see it with his own eyes, the boy got up and began to leap around.

Well, news spread to the authorities about what my husband and done. One day his superior called him in and said, "If you have so much faith in this Jesus, let's send you to that hotbed, Jerusalem, so you can see firsthand that he won't be able to get out of the mess he is in now." This was a few months before those who were afraid of Jesus managed to have him arrested and charged with blasphemy and treason. As I said, it was a way to punish my husband. Jerusalem has become a very dangerous place. And uprooting our family from where we have always lived, out of our home, into strange surroundings was hard on all of us. But it is because of this move that I found myself at the foot of the very cross where Jesus was crucified.

It was the most terrible thing I have ever seen. Yet, I had such a fascination with Jesus that I could not tear my eyes away, even from the torture he received. After his arrest and trial, he was held overnight in a dungeon and then brought before the people who called out furiously, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" I couldn't believe how quickly the mob mentality spread to people who didn't know Jesus at all. It is amazing how fear and ignorance can so easily lead to rage and hate.

Then they stripped him and flogged him and put a crown of thorns on his head to mock the claim that he was a king. And he struggled from pain and humiliation as he pulled that heavy cross up the hill to the place they call The Skull where he was crucified him between two common criminals.

But in the midst of all this pain and horror, I noticed a group of women who seemed to have a genuine love for him and so I sort of attached myself to the back of their group and

followed behind. I just had to see for myself if this man who had saved our servant, while never even being near him, would save himself. I felt sure that he would.

As I listened to the women around me, it became apparent that they had been members of his inner circle for several years, had been a real part of his ministry. Something I could not imagine. No wonder this Jesus was in so much trouble. Women after all! Such a rule breaker. And yet he seemed so calm, so in control. I am fairly certain by her words that his own mother stood just in front of me because at one time, he said, "Mother, behold your Son" and looked right at her. I couldn't hear the rest of it because the mob around us was so loud, but whatever he said seemed to reassure her at the time.

By the sun and by the aching in my legs, I think we had been there about three hours when, almost as if on cue, the crowd quieted for a moment and Jesus cried out loudly, "My God! My God, why have you forsaken me?" This was all it took for his enemies to begin to mock and deride him even more. Taunting him with things like, "If you really are a king, why don't you save yourself?" And many of the women around me began to sob even more violently.

But I will tell you, there was such dignity and majesty in his cry. Oh sure, it was pathetic. After all, he was 33 years old. He had been mistreated and maligned, humiliated publicly and physically tortured for hours. Who wouldn't cry out to whatever God that came to his mind? But Jesus' cry was more of a personal disappointment. And at that moment, I understood that he was talking to a God who really knew and cared about his people.

I can't imagine. As I said before, we are to claim only the Emperor as our God and the truth is that he doesn't give one whit about our lives. If he had walked through the mob right then, as a citizen of Rome, I would be expected to bow down to him. But I certainly didn't call on him for help when my twelve year old sister fell from a boat into the Sea of Galilee during a

storm and drowned. As I wept for the emptiness of the palate we had always slept on together in our parents' home and cried out, "Why, oh why" I knew my so-called god would not be coming to comfort me.

But Jesus' cried as if he knew, REALLY KNEW that HIS God, whoever he is, could really feel his pain. I hope that when those women who loved him so are faced with their grief and despair in the days ahead, they will remember the example that their Jesus gave them. How freeing it must be to have a God who understands and cares about personal pain. Who even seems to feel it with you.

And then, I heard one of the women near me, I think her name was Salome, ask the others, "Did you hear what he said? Why he is singing one of David's songs? He is worshipping Yahweh, even as he dies. What can this mean?" And I am not ashamed to say that, by this time, I felt so much a part of their sisterhood that I leaned in – just like I was one of them – to hear the rest.

It seems Jesus words came from an ancient hymn that he probably learned from his Rabbi. From what I could tell, King David sang these very words when he himself had been treated with hostility and suffered at the hands of *his* own people. The women told how their sons and brothers, James and Peter and Lazarus, would come home from Sabbath School and talked about the King who prayed for deliverance and about how their God had saved him. They remembered that, just after he sang the words that Jesus cried, he also sang words of delivery and of his assurance that God never forsakes those whom he loves.

And this gave the women around me such joy, such peace. Some of them claimed that they had even sung the song after their Passover meal, just yesterday and knew it well. They

said to one another, "See our God has not forsaken us. Our Jesus only wants to reassure us that we can say anything to our Heavenly Father and we will understand."

The rest of the mob didn't know how to react. Some thought Elijah had been raised from the dead. Others rushed to give him wine on a sponge, lifting it to his mouth on a stick. But at that very moment Jesus took one last breath. And he simply died. Right then. And I knew in my heart at that moment that this man truly was the Messiah.

You see, my husband has witnessed many crucifixions and told me in great detail about them afterwards. And I know that often, it takes criminals days to die. The sun will set and rise and set again and still they get no relief from their agony. Yet Jesus lasted only a few hours. He said what he had to say to his tormentors, to his loved ones and to his God and then he simply gave up his Spirit.

And before I could begin to doubt my beliefs, we heard a loud sound – a surreal noise like a long, exaggerated clap of thunder. And they say that the curtain that hung at the altar in the Temple of David simply tore itself in two, like the hearts of those around me. And then there was silence because *everyone* knew. They knew that this man was not an ordinary man. And that perhaps, we had all been part of something horrific.

But one centurion, one brave man, a man I know well – my own Marcus, stepped away from his soldiers and toward the one who had finally received his peace. And without hesitation he said with authority to everyone who would listen, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

And that night, in our home, when we got the children to bed and the servants had left, we fell into each other's arms. And for the first time in many years, Marcus, my brave soldier, my beloved husband, wept.

*Please pray with me: Forgive me, Lord, for the times I – like those who stood at your cross – have acted with cruelty. Thank you for identifying, by your suffering, with all who ever feel forsaken or cry out, "Why?" Help me trust in you in my own times of adversity. Amen.

*This closing prayer was taken from Final Words from the Cross written by Adam Hamilton. Abingdon Press, 2011, page 82.

March 19, 2017

Nazareth Presbyterian Church