

The Revelation of the Centurion
March 29, 2015
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
Palm Sunday
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The day began like any other day really. I was up before dawn and roused my men to ready themselves quickly, as the procurator needed us immediately. As one of the higher ranking centurions in Jerusalem, my command of one hundred men receives orders directly from our procurator, Pontius Pilate.

I'm a career soldier, never had time for a family. I grew up on a farm outside Rome and joined the legion in hopes of seeing the world, and earn some land. Somehow, the life of soldier suited me better than farming and I've stuck with it. I've seen some pretty amazing things in my time.

I arrived in Judea shortly after my enlistment and was in Jerusalem when the governor Herod died. That was a mess, I can tell you! When Herod's son Archelaus came to claim his governorship in Jerusalem, he managed to insult the Jews. That led to rioting. Archelaus called out the soldiers to break up the mob, and when it was all over, by Jove! 3,000 people were dead! That was my introduction to the Jews. Stubborn, rebellious people who oppose the good rule of the Roman Empire. Not that you can blame them for resisting the huge taxes, but any civilized person can see the benefits brought to this backward outpost by the Empire.

After my stint as a common soldier, I was promoted to the rank of centurion and enlisted

for the usual 25 years. I've spent my life supervising the local auxiliary forces here in Jerusalem. Mostly men from Sebaste and Caesarea. We've helped the Jews and they don't have the good sense to know it! It was my men built most of the roads leading out of the city. You know the big theater in town? Ya, you know, the huge amphitheatre, two stories high? My men built that one! We had a special architect come all the way from Rome to direct the project. Got a special commendation from the procurator on that one!

Anyway, my men are good men. Not from Rome of course. A little rough around the edges, but who says a soldier has to be polished, right? So we get up and head out to Pilate. He's over at the fortress of Antonia. It seems the chief priests of the Jews are all upset about some guy. He didn't look like much. Kind of skinny, not well dressed or anything. But he did have this presence about him. Stood tall. Had kind eyes. Even though the priests were mad enough to kick a camel, they kept their distance around him. I guess the guy lost his case in the Jewish courts and they brought him to Pilate to enforce the death sentence. The Jewish courts can enforce all punishments except death. That they must leave up to the procurator.

Well, Pilate was resisting them, probably just to be ornery. He has no love for the Jews. After having been here so long, I've come to like them. They're not so bad as Pilate thinks. I have some I even count as friends. But anyway, even though this guy didn't say anything bad and the priests had no evidence, the charge was pretty serious. Calling yourself King of the Jews and setting yourself up against the Emperor is, in fact, punishable by death. You've got to hand to ole' Pilate though, the old goat! Even then he's trying to needle them on. He suggests releasing this "King of the Jews" in honor of the festival. Well, of course that doesn't hold water!

Some guy named Barabbas was released instead. The King of the Jews was handed over to my boys for flogging.

Now, granted, most of them don't have soldiering in their blood, it's just a job, so you can't blame them for making the best of a bad situation. One of my men had the bright idea of making a game of it all, being that the accused was the "King of the Jews." It was a morale thing. So we gathered the whole cohort, all 500 men, and brought them to the Palace. Someone found a purple cloak for the fellow, I think his name was ... Jesus, and a crown of thorns and the men began saluting him, laughing, and kneeling down, calling out "Hail, King of the Jews." This Jesus fellow did look pretty ridiculous. All weak and wobbly from the flogging, this skinny Jewish man with the cloak and the crooked crown of thorns. Jesus as Emperor! Ha! He really was a spectacle!

Then the men started to get a little too boisterous and began striking Jesus and spitting on him. Now, it's good for the men to let off a little steam, but still, they are Roman soldiers and should maintain some standards. In any case, what use would it be if Jesus died before the crucifixion?

I took only about 20 men from my troops; it wasn't a big job. The poor fellow really was weak, so we grabbed a man in the crowd from Cyrene to carry the cross for him. We had a couple of other thugs to haul out to the site as well. It was proving to be a glorious day for the Empire. Although, I have to admit, there were a few times when I glanced over at him, marching silently despite the hissing crowds, and I caught his eye. They still were kind eyes. Too kind. So

full of love and compassion, it embarrassed me to be leading this execution. I had to shake it off. No good feeling for your prisoners. Just makes the job harder.

When we got to the place of the skull, we offered the prisoners the usual wine with myrrh to lessen the pain, but the odd guy, this Jesus, refused. So the men crucified all three on the hill, and we stood guard at the death watch. It was about 9 in the morning when we crucified them. To wile away the hours, the men cast lots for the prisoners' clothes. Kept them occupied. Many of the mob stayed too. They called out jeers to Jesus, even the other two thugs on their crosses found the energy to taunt him also. It's funny how when a person is down, he has to make someone else feel lower just to make himself feel better. Mighty Jupiter! They were dying men and still they nurture their insecurities!

Then it started getting really weird. At noon it got dark. Really dark. Spine tingling, chilling, shivering dark. The sun just stopped. I can't explain it. It just became like night in the middle of the day. Lots of the crowds started screaming and sobbing. Most ran away in fear. Went back home I suppose. I couldn't think of why I'd be safer in my bunk than right where I was, so I stayed put. Besides, I had my duty. Some of the men got antsy, but I barked out my orders and they calmed down.

Something was not right. Something was clearly wrong, and my gut told me it had to do with the man with the kind eyes. All those hours he hung there in silence, in pain, with his labored breath, and his presence, his loving presence could be felt. It was almost tangible. I stood closest to him, watching him in fascination. Of all the crucifixions I've supervised, this one

touched me the most.

We stood in the darkness for three hours, when suddenly at three o'clock the fellow Jesus cried out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It pierced the darkness like a sword. There was a sudden stillness to the air; the calm before a storm. Some of the crowds rushed around, someone even tried to give him something to drink. The air was heavy. Dark. Brooding. We all looked around us and above us. My men huddled together.

Suddenly, Jesus gave a last cry, was it of pain? or joy? And he breathed his last. And there was a sound like thunder through the sky, ripping through the clouds. And in that moment, that awful, glorious moment, I saw the man Jesus for who he really was. I was awestruck and humbled. The reality of it shattered my mind so that I could not move, but only stand in stunned silence with the enormity of it. It was blindingly clear. "Truly, this man was God's Son!"

Amen.

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