

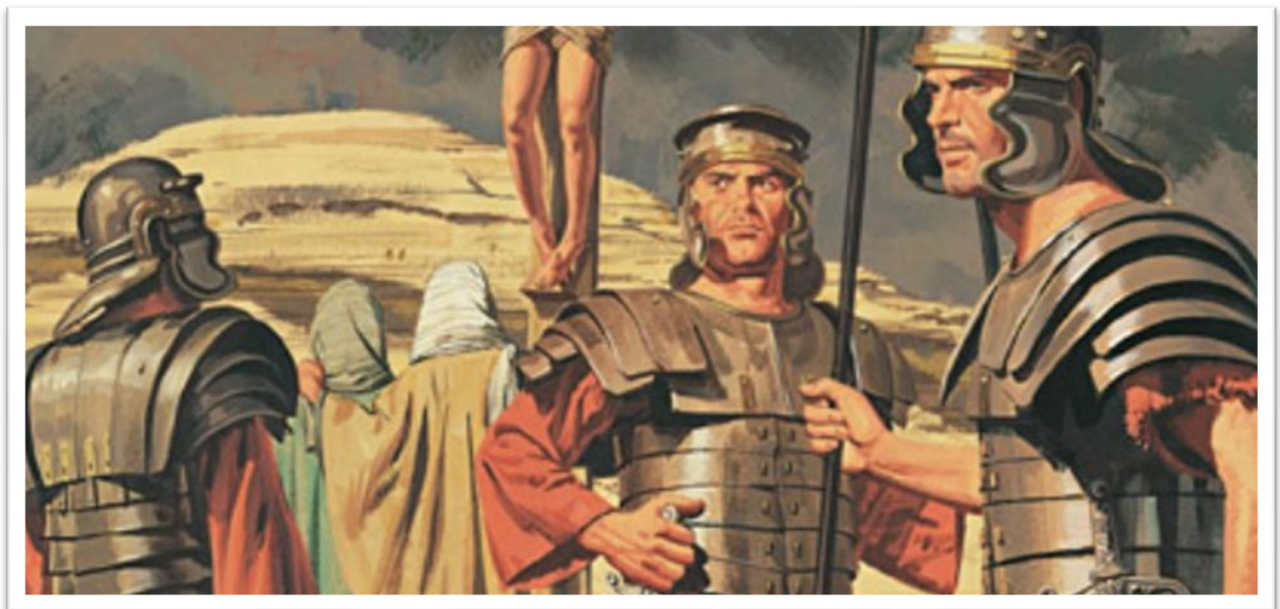
MULLINS LENTEN CHURCHWIDE LENTEN STUDY  
SUNDAYS @ 9:45 A.M.

MARCH 3, 2024

SESSION 3: THE SOLDIERS

**Biblical Foundation:**

- Matthew 8:5-13
- Matthew 27:54
- Mark 15:39
- Luke 23:47



**The Roman Soldiers at Jesus's Cross**

Read either Matthew 27:32-37; Mark 15:21-24; Luke 23:26, 33, 36-38; and John 19:23-25.

- How is the soldiers' treatment of Simon of Cyrene in Matthew, Mark, and Luke a display of Roman power?
- In all four Gospels, the soldiers throw dice for Jesus's clothes. The detail is an allusion (indirect reference) to Psalm 22:18 in Matthew and Mark and a direct reference to it in John. Why did early Christians connect this psalm to Jesus's death? What does the soldiers' gambling, in itself, reveal about their attitude toward their task?
- Why might Luke, uniquely, portray the soldiers as joining other bystanders in mocking Jesus? How is their mockery informed by Roman ideas about authority and power.
- AJ notes the centurion in Mark 15:44-45 confirms the fact of Jesus's death to Pilate. Why is this detail important for Christians' message about Jesus?

- “Roman hands crucify Jesus,” writes AJ, “and Roman eyes watch him die.” Why is it important for Christians today to remember the Roman Empire’s responsibility for Jesus’s death?
- Where today do you see the insensitivity of the powerful and privileged toward those who suffer and die, even when they are complicit in that suffering and death? When, if ever, have you acted with such insensitivity yourself?

## **Introducing Centurions**

Centurions were Roman army officers who commanded “centuries,” units of 80 (not 100) soldiers, and who had administrative and judicial responsibilities. Centurions were elected by tribunes (military officials) in the Roman republic, and they could be appointed by the emperor once the republic became an empire. Centurions were “expected to be natural leaders, not headstrong but steady, not inclined to attack but ready to protect their posts at all costs.” Centurions were usually literate, well paid, and “a number gained Roman citizenship,” which carried such certain rights (see how Roman citizenship benefited Paul in Acts 22:25-29; 25:10-12).

- Who might we consider centurions’ counterparts today and why? Do we think of high-ranking military officers today as natural leaders, “steady, not inclined to attack”? Can you name any such officers today or in the past?

## **Jesus Heals a Centurion’s Servant**

Matthew 8:5-13

- As AJ notes, the centurion addresses Jesus, in Matthew’s Greek, as *kyrios*, which “can have the connotation of sir’ (as in lords and ladies’), but it is also the Greek term used to translate the Hebrew name of God, YHWH. Matthew leaves it up to the readers to determine what inflection we want to give the term.” What do you think the centurion’s calling Jesus “lord” indicates? What do you mean when you call Jesus “lord”?
- The person who is paralyzed in the centurion’s home could also be the centurion’s child; as A) notes, the Greek word Matthew uses can mean either servant/slave or child. To what extent, if any, does this information change how you think about the centurion’s request of Jesus, and why?
- AJ states the centurion’s response reflects “not only the obedience but also the trust that marks the Roman military system.” How closely related are obedience and trust, in your opinion, and why? The word for “faith” in Greek (*pistis*) can also mean “trust”; how do you see faith and trust as both synonymous and distinct? What qualities other than trust, if any, can motivate obedience? AJ says, “the assembly gathered in Jesus’s name” should function with similar trust. When have you experienced such trust in the church?
- Does or ought obedience to human authorities also play a role in your assembly? How does this obedience differ from obedience in a military system?
- AJ claims that the centurion recognizes not only the status of those enslaved to him but also “his own status as enslaved, with only God (and not the emperor) as his master.” Do

you read the centurion's words this way? Do you, or should you, think of God or Jesus as your "master"? How does the language of master and slave highlight virtues of faith (see Mark 10:43-44)?

- How did Jesus, as AJ says, take on the "role of one enslaved" in his life and death (see Mark 10:45; Matthew 26:42; John 5:19, 30)? How helpful or desirable is the metaphor of God as a slave master?
- Why is Jesus "amazed" (Matthew 8:10) by the centurion's response? Does Jesus's statement diminish or dismiss those in Israel who have, previously in Matthew, shown faith in him (4:24-25; 8: 1-4)? What, if anything, distinguishes the centurion's faith from theirs?
- What does this amazement at the centurion lead Jesus to say about the relationship of "outsiders" (who come "from east and west" and "insiders" ("the heirs") at the future messianic feast (verses 11-12)? How does AJ say this scene anticipates the reactions of "insiders" and "outsiders" at Jesus's crucifixion?
- Read Luke 7:2-10, which is another version of the narrative in Matthew 8:5-13. Do you prefer one version of this story over the other? Why or why not? How might the elders' words (Luke 7:4) reflect complicated relationships between people who are in power and those over whom they have power? Does the centurion's physical absence from Luke's story heighten, diminish, or have no effect on his expression of faith in Jesus? How?

### **The Centurion's Declaration**

Matthew 27:54; Mark 15:39; Luke 23:47. What similarities and differences they notice.

- AJ notes that some readers see Mark's centurion as being "facetious" and unknowingly ironic in calling Jesus "God's Son." How does reading the centurion's words as flippant sarcasm reinforce the conflict between human and heavenly ideas about power and authority? How comfortable or uncomfortable does this reading make you, and why? How does Matthew's added detail of the earthquake affect this reading?
- AJ also suggests Mark and Matthew's centurion "gets the point" about Jesus that his disciples do not: "Jesus's primary role is not to be seen in the miracles." Have you known or known of non-Christians who seem to "get" Jesus more than many Christians do? Who and how? When and how, if ever, have non-Christians or Christians of other denominations or communions deepened and enriched your own faith? How could this reading shape (or reshape) Christian evangelism?
- In Luke, the centurion refers to Jesus not as God's Son— since, as AJ points out, for Luke "all people are children of God" (Luke 3:38) but as an "innocent" or, more accurately translated, a "righteous" man. AJ says "righteous" means "uprightness of character, fidelity to Torah, generosity to others.... a lifetime of good works." She suggests it evokes Isaiah 53:11b, among other Scriptures. Why might Luke choose to emphasize Jesus's righteousness at the cross?
- Why might he choose to have the centurion, as Rome's representative, do so? Had you been at the cross, witnessing what the centurion witnessed, what single statement might you have made, and why?

- AJ notes Christians through the centuries have often admired, told legends about, and even revered as a saint the centurion. Is your opinion of the centurion positive, negative, or neutral, and why?

### In Closing

Read aloud from Witness at the Cross: “I have my doubts that there was a centurion at the foot of the cross.... But the words the Evangelists place on [the centurion’s] lips ring true on so many levels.” Consider these questions inspired by AJ’s reflections:

- To what extent do or ought the centurion’s words help define what Christians mean when they refer to Jesus as “Son of God”?
- What ethical consequences follow from reading the centurion’s statement in Matthew and Mark as an affirmation of all people as God’s children?  
In Luke, AJ states, the soldier’s “remind us that innocent people... are sometimes executed.” What role do or should people of faith play in identifying and preventing such situations, and responding when they do occur?
- How do people of faith keep righteousness from becoming self-righteousness?
- How does or how could you and your congregation respond to people who suffer with increased righteousness-that is, uprightness of character, fidelity to God’s commandments, and generous, good works?



### How to Set Up Amplify Media:

Go to: <https://my.amplifymedia.com/amplify>

1. Click the face icon.
2. Click access code.
3. Enter Mullins congregational Access Code: RXKSNZ to login.
4. Set up your account.

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