

“Be Happy, Be Authorized”

The Rev. Drew Willard
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2nd Sun./Pentecost
Memorial Day

Psalm 91:1-15

Luke 7:1-10

When [the centurion] heard of Jesus, he sent to him elders of the [Judeans],
asking him to come and heal his slave.

And when they came to Jesus, they besought him earnestly, saying,

“He is worthy to have you do this for him,
for he loves our nation, and he built us our synagogue.”

Luke 7:3-5

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to recognize the humanity of our enemies even as we oppose injustice –
not only when it affects us, but when it affects our opponents as well.

Help us to fight when that is needed for the sake of justice;

And in times of disagreement – even conflict, may our words be instruments of peace
to overcome evil with good.

Amen

They say there are no atheists in foxholes, meaning that –

when someone is in peril of their life, that is when they take God seriously,
calling on God for help.

You don't have to be in war to experience life *in extremis* – life in the extreme,
but under such circumstances, that is the occasion when a person will set aside
petty differences and loosely held beliefs, to hang onto what's real.

However, not everybody who believes in God survives a terrible crisis and
not everybody who survives, believes in God,

but a person doesn't lose their faith under such circumstances,
that's when we find it – we find out what we really believe in.

I knew a man from my last church who had such a conversion –
literally in a foxhole as explosions were happening all around him
during WWII.

John Tucker promised God that if he got through that night,
he would go to church every Sunday...

Well, they both made good on their promises!

John was well into his 80s at the time I knew him
and he worked full time at the local Winn Dixie.

If he wasn't bagging groceries at the checkout, he was bringing in the shopping carts.
Thin as a rail, he would be moving stock as well as
any of the younger people working there.

He was a ladies' man and he always seemed to have a couple girlfriends
among our church members at any one time,
and they would all be sitting with him in church.

John told me about a wartime romance with an Italian woman he wanted to marry,
but he lost touch with her when he got back to the States.

It was years later that he discovered his mother
had hidden the letters she had sent to him.

Willard, p.2

He was a character and John worked until he was 90 or so
when he died of a respiratory condition.

We buried his ashes in our memorial garden and one day,
one of his co-workers came by.

She was a beautiful middle-aged Korean woman,
a soldier's bride herself, I suppose.

She placed a single flower – a white rose, as I recall,
on the spot where we put John's cremains.

Then she folded her hands in silent prayer and went away...

I once read a quote by General William T. Sherman about how war unleashes powers
that won't stop until it has spent itself, destroying everything in its path.

Our lives are messy enough without human-caused catastrophes like war
along with nature's hurricanes and earthquakes.

How is it that anyone survives the indiscriminate brutality of war?

At "Talk Time With The Pastor" last week, we were talking about the nature of God
and I told the group about a recent video I had seen on the internet
that helps with looking at things from God's perspective...

It begins with the face of a young woman looking up
and the camera suddenly rises like a Google map search in reverse,
showing her reclining on a grassy field that becomes a village
then a network of roads and cities, highways into urban sprawl,
state, nation, world.

From the Earth to the Moon, passed Mars to Saturn, Jupiter, and beyond
to clusters of stars, galaxies, cosmic clouds and beyond – to stop...

then return in rapid succession from stars to worlds
to the young woman, her face, her eye, the retina, cell,
microscopic structures, and subatomic particles to stop...
and back again to gaze upon the woman's smiling face!

Given the enormity of space, how could God be aware of –
let alone have any influence over, the immense complexity
of what happens on Planet Earth?

Then again, when you consider that immense complexity,
how could it be possible for anything to come into being
without a Creator's intention?

It certainly would be possible for a Creator with the perspective of
the farthest flung stars!

Managing the inner workings of just one such planet as ours
would likely be a full-time job for the Creator –
so there may very well be only one planet that can sustain life
at any one time in the history of the Universe.

Willard, p.3

So, with something like the random chaos of war, how is it that a terrified soldier curled up in a crater would be spared?

There certainly are many who were not spared – and yet it happened that John lived to tell the tale and lived a life of significance for those of us who got to know and love him.

He is missed and we are all the less for his passing, except that now you know him through his story.

War gathers up such people on both sides of a conflict and throws them together, yet even those who have the power and intention to wage war are limited by weather and terrain, unit strength and training, preparation and probability.

Jesus himself came to wage war, but not in the same sense as the engine of war that human violence has always been.

Jesus is that part of God that came from beyond the stars to be woven together in the genetic threads of being human.

Jesus is that part of God that walked among us as one of us and he entered into the confrontation of human commerce.

Jesus said

*“Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth;
I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*

Yet four times in Revelation, that sword is described as the sword of his mouth, the words of his mouth.

In Revelation 19:15^a,

From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations,

The enemy he slays with the words of his mouth are the lies that cause people to be separate from one another.

His words of truth strike down ignorance as well as the toxic fear and hatred they produce.

That is what unfolded as a centurion – an officer of the Roman army of occupation which is comparable to a modern infantry company commander, recognized in Jesus – a civilian peasant, as someone who had the power to heal, the power to give life – even by his words.

<https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-rank-equivalent-of-a-Roman-Centurion-in-todays-military>

In turn, Jesus recognized the common humanity of this centurion on whose behalf an earnest plea made by those Jewish leaders of Capernaum who had been Jesus’ adversaries themselves.

Yet the Judeans spoke up on behalf of the centurion to affirm his worthiness as a wise administrator and committed public servant for the people of Capernaum.

Willard, p.4

In his request to Jesus, the centurion himself made the comparison that –
just as he was an officer who gave orders and things got done,
so he believed Jesus could do the same: say the word, and it will happen.
That is what happened as Jesus healed the centurion's servant
by his word alone – actually Jesus didn't even have to say anything directly.
It got done!

Roman soldiers – as they appear in the Gospels and the Book of Acts,
are not condemned outright as occupation troops of an evil Empire,
or even as the ones who actually beat and crucified Jesus Christ.
They are treated sympathetically as human beings who happen to be
in the role of the military – like the centurion in today's lesson could.
It could very well be that this the same centurion at the end of Luke's gospel,
who stands at the foot of the cross where he praises God and says,
"Certainly this man was innocent!"
That event is significant because it provides an example of an enemy
who was transformed from persecuting a state sanctioned scapegoat,
to recognizing the humanity of his victim.

It would be naïve to say that our world
will ever be free of war.

Our president on his visit to Hiroshima, Japan
where we dropped an atomic bomb to bring WWII to a close,
reiterated his call to put an end to nuclear weapons;
even as our military upgrades its nuclear arsenal
to meet new nuclear threats since the Cold War.

We must be prepared to fight and even Mohandas Gandhi said,
"Where there is injustice I always believe in fighting..."

But Gandhi also said,
"It is how we fight that is the question".

<http://www.123helpme.com/view.asp?id=66730>

With wisdom, we must do what we can to make that fight
in every heart and in every society to overcome injustice.
But there is a point when – after we have done all that we can do,
that we turn to God through Christ, to save us in ways yet unforeseen.
Who is to say whether or not John Tucker was saved by his desperate prayer to God
in the middle of a night of that fierce bombing?
He believed it and lived to stay true to his word.

Amen

*Our lesson today from Psalm 91:1-15 describes God as one who will help us,
even when there is physical danger...*

- ¹Living in the Most High's shelter, camping in the Almighty's shade,
²I say to the LORD,
"You are my refuge, my stronghold! You are my God—the one I trust!"
- ³God will save you from the hunter's trap and from deadly sickness.
⁴God will protect you with his pinions; you'll find refuge under his wings.
His faithfulness is a protective shield.
- ⁵Don't be afraid of terrors at night, arrows that fly in daylight,
⁶or sickness that prowls in the dark, destruction that ravages at noontime.
- ⁷Even if one thousand people fall dead next to you, ten thousand right beside you—
it won't happen to you.
- ⁸Just look with your eyes, and you will see the wicked punished.
⁹Because you've made the LORD my refuge,
the Most High, your place of residence—
¹⁰no evil will happen to you; no disease will come close to your tent.
- ¹¹Because he will order his messengers to help you, to protect you wherever you go.
¹²They will carry you with their own hands
so you don't bruise your foot on a stone.
- ¹³You'll march on top of lions and vipers;
you'll trample young lions and serpents underfoot.
- ¹⁴God says,
"Because you are devoted to me, I'll rescue you.
I'll protect you because you know my name.
- ¹⁵Whenever you cry out to me, I'll answer.
I'll be with you in troubling times. I'll save you and glorify you.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Luke 7:1-10

¹After [Jesus] had ended all his sayings in the hearing of the people he entered Caper'na-um.

² Now a centurion had a slave who was dear to him, who was sick and at the point of death.

³ When he heard of Jesus, he sent to him elders of the [Judeans], asking him to come and heal his slave.

⁴ And when they came to Jesus, they besought him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy to have you do this for him, ⁵ for he loves our nation, and he built us our synagogue."

⁶ And Jesus went with them.

When he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to him, saying to him,

"Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; ⁷ therefore I did not presume to come to you.

But say the word, and let my servant be healed.

⁸ For I am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my slave, 'Do this,' and he does it."

⁹ When Jesus heard this he marveled at him, and turned and said to the multitude that followed him, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."

¹⁰ And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave well.