

Mocked by the Soldiers

The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA

Matthew 27:26-36

March 19, 2017

During Lent, Pastor Stu and I are sharing a sermon series called “Faces at the Cross,” covering the various witnesses to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Today we will take a closer look at the Roman soldiers charged with executing Jesus.

Have you ever been in the presence of something really important or beautiful, but missed it because you were thinking about something else? The first example that comes to my mind is the many people who go around mesmerized by their smart phones. You may have seen families in a restaurant, each of them staring in silence at their own phone. Or kids in a National Park or museum engrossed in a video game. They are missing real relationships and wonderful experiences.

I remember when I was about ten years old, my grandparents took my sister and me to Sweden for summer vacation. While they drove us around the beautiful countryside of Sweden, visiting castles and relatives, my sister and I sat in the back of the station wagon playing with our Barbie dolls. I never knew what I was missing until I was an adult. How I wish I could relive that experience now with my eyes open and a good camera along!

The soldiers in charge of guarding Jesus missed it! They were face-to-face with the Son of God and never even knew it! The man they ridiculed, as a lunatic who imagined that he was the King of the Jews, really was the King of Heaven and Earth. The prisoner they were executing went willingly to the cross because he knew that only by his punishment and death would sinners be forgiven and able to receive eternal life.

What exactly *did* Jesus endure on the day he was crucified? He had already been up all night, having gone to the garden of Gethsemane with his disciples to pray. He was arrested by a mob and taken to the high priests for questioning. The religious authorities dragged Jesus back and forth to various government officials until they obtained the verdict they wanted: Jesus would be crucified that day, while the criminal Barabbas would be released.

Once the verdict was announced, Governor Pilate had Jesus flogged. Roman flogging, or ‘scourging’ was so fierce that often prisoners died from it. The whip was made by tying pieces of bone or lead onto the ends of strips of leather. The victim was stripped, tied to a post, and whipped. Severe flogging reduced the flesh to a bloody pulp, often ripping open the muscles so deeply that the bones were exposed. The phrase “*by his stripes we are healed*” refers to this flogging.

After the scourging was over, the soldiers started to make fun of Jesus. Since Pilate had called him the “King of the Jews,” one of the soldiers grabbed a mid-length red cloak worn by military and civilian officials as part of their uniform. He threw the cloak over Jesus’ shoulders, laughing about the “king of the Jews” in his fine scarlet robe.

Next the soldiers looked around the courtyard for something to use as a crown. The first thing they found was some thorny branches. Nothing like our briar bushes, these thorns were as long as my thumb and very sharp! Some of the soldiers twisted the branches around into a crown which they pressed down onto Jesus’ head. The word translated “crown” was normally used to refer to the wreath of leaves awarded to successful athletes, or to the circlet of leaves worn by Tiberius Caesar on Roman coins. Jesus’ crown was made of thorns, which would deliberately cause even more pain.

To complete the kingly costume, the soldiers shoved a shaft of reed into Jesus' right hand, imitating the royal scepter held by earthly kings as a sign of their office. Then they pretended to pay homage to their mock king. They bowed, and knelt, and taunted Jesus. You can imagine the mean laughter and the nasty comments from the soldiers standing around watching. They yelled, "Hail, King of the Jews," and spit in his face.

Finally, one of the soldiers grabbed the reed scepter from Jesus' hand and used it to strike Jesus several times about the head, which pressed the crown of thorns deeper into his scalp.

How did Jesus keep from crying out? How was he able to keep from defending himself, from striking back, or from trying to get away?

Jesus knew the purpose of his life; he knew the plan God had for him. Just a week ago, Jesus had told his disciples, "*the Son of Man [meaning himself] will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day, he will be raised to life.*"ⁱⁱ

Centuries earlier, the prophet Isaiah foretold of this suffering (ch 53):

*"He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering... he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. ... because he poured out his life unto death... he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."*ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus willingly endured pain, misery, suffering and shame in order to purchase for us everlasting life, and joy, and glory. He took the punishment that we deserved for our sins, so that we might receive what we did not deserve: grace.

"After the soldiers finished mocking him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes back on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. They came to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of the skull.)" - Matthew 27:31-33

"Golgotha" is a transliteration of an Aramaic word meaning 'skull.' Our English word 'Calvary' comes from the Latin word 'calva,' which also means 'a skull.'ⁱⁱⁱ

Once they reached Golgotha, the soldiers offered Jesus cheap wine, sour as vinegar, to drink. But they were tormenting him again; they had added some sort of plant extract known as "gall" to the wine that made it terribly bitter. Jesus, although suffering terribly from thirst, was unable to drink it. He turned away.

After they had nailed Jesus' hands and feet to the cross, and hoisted him up to die a slow agonizing death, they sat down near the cross and cast lots for his clothes.

The Gospel of John describes the scene in more detail:

"When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the tunic remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. "Let's not tear it," they said to one another. "Let's decide by lot who will get it." This happened that the scripture [Psalm 22:18] might be fulfilled that said:

"They divided my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment." So, this is what the soldiers did."^{iv}

The expression 'cast lots' refers to the custom of tossing flat stones to determine God's will on a yes/no question, and for making other decisions such as selecting which priest would serve, or which piece of land was to be inherited, or which goat would be sacrificed. Casting lots sounds just like the coin toss which determines who gets the ball first at the beginning of a football game.^v

I think that this scene at the cross is incredible! The soldiers were oblivious to what was happening right above their heads. Their attention was directed to articles of used clothing, normal every-day items, while beside them the King of kings and Lord of lords was fulfilling his life's purpose. And they missed it!

Do you remember this old nursery rhyme?

Pussy cat, pussy cat, where have you been?

I've been to London to visit the Queen.

Pussy cat, pussy cat, what did you there?

I frightened a little mouse under her chair.

The cat was in the presence of Queen Elizabeth I, ruler of England and much of the civilized world, yet the cat was oblivious to her majesty, wisdom and power. Such an opportunity, and he missed it!

I remember being a young teenager when my parents made me and my siblings sit down in front of the TV and watch the astronauts land on the moon. Mom said this was an incredible, once-in-a-lifetime event, and we were watching history in the making. She would not permit us to miss it.

No one was there at Golgotha to make those soldiers pay attention, or to get them to realize that they were ignoring the most important event in human history.

What exactly was it they were missing?

- On the cross, Jesus Christ, the sinless, perfect Son of God, took upon Himself the sins of the world, the sins of every human being who ever lived. He was our **substitute**. He took the punishment that we deserved for our sins. His blood cleansed us from sin. For those who believe in Him, His suffering made us whole and restored our relationship with God.^{vi}
- By his death, Jesus paid the **ransom** that set us free from guilt and from enslavement to sin. He redeemed us from the claim that Satan had on all sinners.^{vii}
- The Old Testament covenant between God and Israel required the annual Passover observance and the sacrifice of a lamb to atone for sin every year. In contrast, Jesus Christ, himself, was the sacrifice that made complete **atonement for sin**, once for all time.^{viii}
- Jesus did what we sinners were unable to do for ourselves. Because of his work on the cross, God pardons sinners who have personal faith in Jesus Christ as crucified Savior and Risen Lord. God accepts believers as righteous for Christ's sake.^{ix}

All of that is what the soldiers missed, while they were busy casting lots for old clothes. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and what that accomplished, is more important than men landing on the moon, or the Queen of England, or the latest tweet or Facebook post.

My hope, my prayer, my desire, is that you WON'T miss it! Today, this week, this Lenten season, think about what Jesus suffered during the crucifixion. Think about what he accomplished on the cross. I know that many of you already have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. But some of you do not. I know that when I was growing up, the church taught that Jesus was just another good person in history, like Abraham Lincoln or George Washington. But Jesus is so much more than that!

Jesus changed the course of history! Jesus died to save *you* from your sins. His blood washed away your sin and guilt.

Put your faith in Jesus Christ, who died so that you could have new life in Him, eternal life with God.

“By His stripes, you are healed.” Don't miss it!

... if you have questions, or would like to know more about what it means to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, Pastor Stu or Rev. Craig Kephart or I would be delighted to meet with you.

ⁱ Mt 20:17-19

ⁱⁱ Isaiah 53:3,5,12b

ⁱⁱⁱ Expositors Bible Commentary on Matthew, Vol 8, p. 575

^{iv} John 19:23-24 and Psalm 22:18

^v Expository Dictionary of Bible Words, p. 609, “lot”

^{vi} Romans 3:23-26; Colossians 2:14; Matthew 27:37.

^{vii} Romans 3:24; Galatians 4:4,5

^{viii} Romans 3:25,26; Hebrews 9:11-15

^{ix} 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 5:16; Romans 4:23-25; Galatians 2:15-16; English Standard Version *Reformation Study Bible*, footnote p. 1695