

SERMON SERIES: THE WALKING DEAD 4
MATTHEW 27:45-56
MARCH 20, 2016

March Madness is upon us. Which means several things, a loss of productivity for two weeks throughout the country, yelling at the TV and buzzer beaters. With a win-or-go-home tournament full of talented athletes playing a total of three games, you know there will be some exciting finishes. Buzzer beaters or not, there will always be a final score that is obvious to everyone.

On the other end of the spectrum, is a sport like figure skating. I know you are all avid fans here, but there could be nothing more different from March Madness. It's not about elbows and sweat; it's about gliding and grace. One of the biggest differences is that it is subjective. It requires judges, and that's where it gets really sticky. You can't count on a final score objectively earned. Like a few other sports, you ultimately are not counting on just the performance but also the judges. What they think matters, and they can get it really wrong. You might remember the 2002 figure skating scandal. The Russians won the gold medal, but this happened after everyone assumed the Canadians had won. The TV announcers didn't even need to see the score; they proclaimed the Canadians the winners, except they didn't win. People were stunned. How can different judges watching the same thing see something so different? To this day, people still write about this moment, and they all ask the same question, "How could this loser be declared the victor?"

Believe it or not, this isn't the most shocking declaration by an official in what was seemingly a one-sided affair. We are going to read a story today where Jesus arrives as the unlikely contender and ends up facing the ultimate opponent in the form of death and does it all in front of his hometown crowd. Jesus is going to be beaten, mocked, humiliated, bruised, broken, flogged and ultimately crucified. After being beaten, mocked, humiliated, bruised, broken, flogged and crucified like a common criminal, we see two responses, 1) the pious religious leaders called Jesus the obvious loser, and 2) a Roman centurion official

made the strangest proclamation. After seeing all of this brutality and watching as this man was tortured, humiliated and ultimately killed, this official declared, "Surely this was the Son of God." Anyone within earshot must have been shocked by this judgment. How could two groups watching the same exact event have such divergent understandings? Let's take a closer look at the judges. First the religious officials.

Matthew 27:38-44

Jesus is getting it from every angle. They have watched his trial, his flogging and now his crucifixion. They have made their judgment. If this guy is a savior, then he would save himself. If he was the Messiah, he would be winning and not losing. He said he was the Son of God. If God wants him, then he'll come get him. Jesus has lost. From most any set of optics and metrics, the religious leaders seemed right. This guy claimed to be the Messiah and the Son of God. Messiahs don't lose and God doesn't die, but this guy is doing both. Therefore, he isn't what he said he was.

This speaks to everything the Jewish leaders were expecting. They wanted a Messiah who would make Israel great again. A Messiah who would return them to political and economic prominence. A Messiah who would boot out the Romans. A triumphant king in the line of David who would slay giants and return Israel to superpower status.

The problem with judges is they are never truly subjective. You see this in sports and you see it in the courtroom. Eyewitnesses are at the same time the most persuasive and also most unreliable resource in a courtroom. As of 2014, The Innocence Project declared that three fourths of their overturned cases were based on original convictions gained by faulty eyewitnesses. Two different people can watch the same thing and see completely different truths. This is called the *misinformation effect*. Simply put, we tend to see what we expect to see. We fit incoming information into beliefs and ideas we already hold to be true.

The religious leaders suffered from the *misinformation effect*. They had a view of how God works. They had a view of what the Messiah should be. When they saw divine things

happen, they could write them off. When they saw how Jesus lived, the miracles, the teachings and the grace, they could see something different because they saw what they expected to see. It was that way in life, and it was that way in death.

Matthew 27:45-53

Let me run you through what the judges have seen here. They have seen multiple scriptural prophecies lived out. An earthquake. A massive veil of theological importance that was supremely thick and well woven being torn from top to bottom and oh yeah, multiple resurrections. Yet they did not see because they didn't want to see it. All of these things can be explained away or just overlooked.

It was right in front of their faces. These religious leaders knew the scripture backwards and forwards. They knew Psalm 22 began with "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" They also knew it was a Psalm that began in the grave and ends with glorious redemption. They knew the veil was the symbol of their separation from the holy of holies. They knew the promises of a new covenant in Jeremiah when they would be fully brought into his presence. The skies grew dark. The earth shook, and they still couldn't see it. Then dead people came back to life.

A large strain of early Jewish thinkers believed that the coming of the Messiah would be accompanied by literal resurrection. In regards to this concept, Rabbi Jeremiah said, *"When you bury me, put shoes on my feet, and give me a staff in my hand and lay me on one side that when Messiah comes I may be ready."*

These religious leaders saw prophecy fulfilled. They saw the sky go dark. They felt the earth tremble and they saw the hope of the resurrection. But Jesus wasn't what they thought he should be, so they didn't believe it.

On the other end of the spectrum, we have a pagan Roman centurion. A man who only minutes earlier was mocking Jesus and dividing up his garments. After witnessing all of these same supernatural events, he had a different response.

Matthew 27:54

This is before the resurrection of Jesus, so it isn't based on that supernatural victory. This is coming from a Roman centurion based on the death of Jesus. Roman centurions were not privileged men who were assigned an honorable post based on their elevated social status or vast income. No, Roman centurions were men who ascended to their post for at least three major reasons. 1) They understood authority. 2) They understood power. 3) They understood death. Roman centurions were in charge of 60-80 men, not even 100 as their name implies. So a centurion had some power, but he knew that many above him had much more power and deserved much more respect. Up through the ranks, to the commanders, generals and ultimately Tiberius Caesar, the ultimate picture of power, whom they referred to as the divine son of Augustus, centurions led their units and specialized in warfare and death. This man saw brutality and anguish on the field of war as countless men faced death in horrifying ways. This specific centurion had been placed on the death squad to oversee state executions. His crew was in charge of making sure each death was professionally executed. Besides all the death this man may have seen on this battlefield, he had probably overseen countless executions by the state. For him, this was just another day at the office. He had seen men tortured and killed on a regular basis, and he probably saw recurring patterns. Men died while cursing their accusers. Men died without the earth shaking. Men died without dead people coming back to life.

This man, who knew and respected power, watched as this powerless man was executed like a common criminal, and he still had the audacity to call him the "Son of God." This man, who knew and respected authority, watched as this lowly man was mocked by his own people, and he still had the temerity to call him divine. This man, who knew and respected death, watched as this Jewish carpenter died on the Roman cross just like countless people before him, but he still had the boldness to call this man God's son. Why?

What was so divine about this moment? How could this man who helped kill Jesus suddenly have a change of heart? This centurion was most likely there and participated throughout this process. That means he played a role when Jesus was mercilessly whipped 39 times with the scourge. That means he played a part when Jesus was mocked by the entire battalion of soldiers. That means he played a part when this bloodied and bruised man was laid upon a rugged Roman cross and affixed to it with massive iron spikes. That means he played a part as everyone filed by and mocked this dying man in his lowest moment. Then this chain of events happens: Jesus cries out, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" He is offered some wine to quench his thirst and then verse 50 says, "He let out a loud cry and then breathed his last." What was so divine about this moment? What changed in this pagan Roman centurion that all of a sudden he was now proclaiming this man, who he had mocked, beaten and nailed to a cross, as the Son of God.

Jesus had just done the most un-god-like thing. He died. He was manhandled by humans, scourged by humans, mocked by humans and then killed by humans. What was so divine about this moment? While this passage remains vague about the thought process and transformation of this Roman centurion, I want to pass along my thoughts as I studied this passage.

Long before gold medals were given out at the Olympics, laurel crowns were given to the victors. The ancient Olympics were celebrated for 1,200 years, starting almost 800 years before Jesus and continuing 400 years after Jesus, and they gave laurel crowns to the victors. These laurel crowns were signs of great honor but they also represented an ironic truth. The symbol of the laurel crown was rooted in Greek mythology. After Roy Jones Jr.'s loss, David Mamet wrote an interesting article about the genesis of the laurel crown:

"Apollo fell in love with the nymph Daphne and pursued her. She abhorred the thought of marriage and fled. He ran mercilessly after her. As it became clear that he would soon possess her, she prayed to her father, Peneios, to preserve her by changing that form that had so enthralled Apollo. Her prayer was answered. She was changed into a laurel tree.

The laurel crown, adorning victors in war and the Olympic Games, was understood to be an ironic reminder that victory is hollow - that most times, on achieving our goal, we find it has changed and is no longer what we pursued - that, indeed, we ourselves have changed in the pursuit.

This Roman centurion looked upon this man wearing not a laurel crown but a crown of thorns. Nothing about this man said “victor.” Nothing about this man said “king,” but there he was with his crown of thorns. I wonder if this centurion pictured all the other crowns worn by men, including the laurel crown. The laurel crown was an ironic reminder that victory had been won, but it was hollow, because the one wearing the laurel crown knew their victory was temporary. The victor would get older and one day someone else would wear the crown. Not only that, the crown won by the victor would eventually wilt and fade away. The same could be true for any crown held by men. Whether king or otherwise, their crowns were temporary. Their authority and power would be passed to someone else upon their death or removal from the throne. All of these crowns were temporary.

In front of the centurion, was a dying man wearing a twisted crown of thorns. It would have been meaningless until he saw the way Jesus died and heard his cry. With Jesus’ loud cry, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” everything changed. Remember this Roman centurion was accustomed to death. He had seen countless men die on the battlefield and on the cross. In the end, most of them likely cursed their enemies and mocked their accusers. They knew they were going out, so they used their final breaths to take their revenge. We see this even in the men being crucified with Jesus. Verse 32 says they too were mocking Jesus. In those final moments, people aren’t trying to make friends and influence people in their darkness; they are clinging to their sinfulness and selfishness to the bitter end.

But not Jesus. He doesn’t curse his accusers. He forgives them. He doesn’t berate his executioners. He loves them. He then simply cries out to God in the only way he could, as a son. Why did this phrase change the way the centurion saw Jesus?

Remember, this centurion was one who understood power and authority because he was a man under authority. We see another picture of this in the story when Jesus heals the centurion's servant as seen in Luke 7 and Matthew 8. The centurion asks Jesus to heal his servant and Jesus agrees and starts to go with him to his house. The centurion tells him there is no need for him to go to his house for the healing, all Jesus needed to do was speak the word. Then he explains his thinking, "I am a man in authority. I tell this man go and he goes." Conversely, we can take from this, when this man was told to go, he went. When it came to power and authority of superior or inferior officers, questioning was not permitted. Only equals could question authority. Equals could express their displeasure, but they would never question a superior.

In this moment, this man sees Jesus call out to God as an equal. Jesus says, "My God," then he says, "Why have you forsaken me?" From a Roman soldier's perspective that is rooted in authority and power, this meant one of two things. 1) This man was an irreverent lunatic who had no respect for his superior or he was the Son of God, an equal, who was calling out in anguish. After watching this man beaten, mocked and crucified all the while refusing to spew evil on those killing him. This man must have realized the latter option was true. This was a divine equal calling out to his father. This was the Son of God.

Think of it like this, there are things my wife can say to me that no one else can. In truth and love, she can tell me that a certain behavior was childish or out of line. Someone hearing that without knowing our relationship might think one of two things. 1) This woman is overstepping her bounds. 2) That is her husband. Essentially saying, "Surely this is the wife of Gabe." Why? Because our special relationship as equals allows her the special right to speak to me in that way.

This untrained pagan Roman centurion, with no understanding of scripture or prophecy, is watching this with fresh eyes. He sees this unlikely contender, whom is being killed for claiming to be the Christ, going to his death. He sees nothing but love and peace in the way he is treating his enemies up until death. Any common man would be blaming others and cursing his enemies, but this man is blessing them and loving them to the end. Then he

cries out to his God as an equal. He has seen people blame God or call out to him before, but not like this, not with such grace until the end, not with such love until the end.

Henri Nouwen, a writer and pastor, said this about Jesus' final cry, "When God's absence was most loudly expressed, God's presence was most profoundly revealed." The unlikely contender has been declared the victor because he was running a race more important than any temporal or physical slog. He was not running for a laurel crown but instead a crown of thorns. The Jews wanted a king with a golden crown or a victor wearing a laurel crown but those crowns represent hollow victories. The greatest victor in human history wore a twisted crown of thorns because his battle was not against flesh and blood. He wasn't seeking a temporary victory over Roman oppression. He wasn't seeking a temporary victory over physical sickness or hunger. He came for the twisted crown of thorns because sin entered this world back in the Garden of Eden. We were all destined for eternal separation from God and a life obsessed with laurel crowns that fade and wilt.

God sent his one and only son, his equal. He sent him into this world to live a life like no one else and to die a death like no one else. When Jesus went to the cross, he stood in our place, because we are by birth and by choice, sinners and enemies of God. Spiritually speaking we were losers, but when Jesus went to the cross, he made a way for losers to be declared winners, for those in last place, the opportunity to be victorious. He went to the cross as the fully human, fully divine Son of God and took our punishment. That is why we see the picture of the temple veil being torn in verse 51. This wasn't a small linen bed sheet. Josephus, the early Jewish historian, describes the temple veil as over 80 feet tall. It was an enormously thick piece of material that separated the outer temple areas from the holy of holies. God resided in that place according to Jewish worship and this veil was the barrier between humanity and God. After the death of Jesus, the temple veil was torn in two from top to bottom. With the atoning death of Jesus, God was opening up the barrier that separates us. The important thing to note is that it was torn from top to bottom. God was coming down to us and doing the work for us all in the person of Jesus.

There is a common malady that many Olympic athletes are currently experiencing, post Olympic blues. Especially prone to this syndrome are those who won Gold medals, our equivalent of laurel crowns. These people have just been proven as the best in the world, they are famous and they are on the road to becoming rich. Why would they become depressed? This widespread phenomenon is built upon a simple premise; these people have gotten to the top and realized they still feel empty. That achievement has driven them for decades and now at the top of the world, they realize they are still alone and still unfulfilled. For some of you today, you need to accept the invitation to follow Jesus and put your faith in him and his work, so you may be reconciled to God. This may mean coming to terms with a *misinformation effect* in your life, that Jesus has been right there in front of you all along, but you haven't seen him. Maybe you could only see what you wanted and expected to see. I pray he has changed your expectations today.

For those of you who are believers today, this challenge is for you. Jesus says we are to follow him in the way he lived his life and the way he surrendered in death. We are to be a community of the twisted thorn crown. Many Christians chase laurel crowns their whole life and find themselves in the end at the top of the mountain still feeling alone. The kingdom life is counterintuitive, it is found in the pursuit of the twisted thorny crown. When you come to grips with the divinity of Jesus and his work on the cross, you have no choice but to stop pursuing the crowns of this world. If you have made the proclamation, "Surely this was the Son of God," then you must look at yourself during this holiday season and be willing to lay down any laurel crowns in your life. It is the unlikely path for all those who follow the unlikely victor.