

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, ‘Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith.’” Jesus marveled at the centurion, a gentile’s faith. How well that fits in this Epiphany season! The centurion fixed his eyes on Jesus and trusted the Lord to work believing his word. Great indeed was the faith of this man. There are only two times in the Gospels that Jesus marvels at someone or something. Here is one of these instances and the other is found in Mark 6:6 where Jesus marvels at the unbelief of the people after he had done and said many things among them. In the reading today, though, Jesus is marveling at the faith of this centurion, a Gentile who came to him appealing for his servant to be healed. This teaches you what your faith is to look like or rather to whom you are to look as you go through this world, this fallen creation.

It’s quite something, then, that Jesus does this because shouldn’t it be us that marvel at Jesus? Shouldn’t we be the ones who stand in awe? You do marvel in life when something amazing happens. Nine years ago, this coming Thursday, Rebekah and I were marveling at the birth of our first-born daughter, Magdalena. To witness life, emerge from the womb and hold in your arms your child is truly marvelous. For Jesus, then, to marvel at this man’s faith, a man who is a sinner like you and me, you ask yourselves, “what does this mean?”

To understand this, you look at what the Lord has revealed to you in his word. In this miracle worked by Jesus for the centurion’s servant, you see a great example of what it means to live by faith. He comes to Jesus and looks only to him. Here is a man who commands a hundred men. In his own words he tells you what he does, “‘And I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.’” He may do that at work but if he’s married and has kids, I wonder how well that goes over at home? But what does he say when he first comes to Jesus? Does he say to Jesus, “Come and do as I say” just like he would command one of his soldiers? No, his response is that of a man who knows his place before God in the flesh. He said, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.” He doesn’t presume to lecture Jesus about why he thinks Jesus should listen to him or do what he asks. In fact, he sees how unworthy he is for Jesus to come into his house and knows simply at the word of Jesus his servant can be healed. That’s quite a statement then, isn’t it?

To understand this further by way of contrast, look at Naaman and how he approaches this whole situation in the Old Testament reading. He wants Elisha to work something for him and then when he’s told to dip in the Jordan river he gets upset because this isn’t how he wants God to operate. Did you catch that? That’s different than the centurion or even the leper whose very body shows a reverence for Jesus as he comes before him and asks to be healed. Naaman, wants God on his terms and the means he chooses. When confronted with the work of God Naaman was angry at first but when confronted with the work of God, the centurion was left confessing his sin.

It’s tempting to be like Naaman and try to define your life toward God in a way you think is right and good. Sin wants to put God in your life in ways that you can manage and are convenient. Your sinful man wants God to be this household god you can pull out of your back pocket when the going gets tough or when you want to try and rationalize your life as being justified because you are so busy and so much is going on. A life not lived in faith toward Christ is a life that despises preaching and God’s word. Even the church, is not immune to this thinking. Look at how easily her members can be tempted to insist they know better than God’s word. “Pro-life, defending children in the womb or the elderly? Marriage between one man and one woman? That’s too offensive, it’s so intolerant and hateful. Closed Communion? Only men serving as Pastors and in positions of authority and leadership in the church? That will turn people away. The liturgy and rich solid hymnody, those gifts and treasures of the faith that have been handed down to us? Those are outdated, we need to be innovative and relevant to what people of the day want.” The opposite of living by faith in humility toward God and confidence in his word is a life lived in pride toward oneself and deaf to God. God, though, sees through all of that. Just as Jesus marveled at the faith of the centurion, he also marveled at the unbelief of the people in Mark 6.

3rd Sunday after the Epiphany—January 22, 2023

Look around you and see you are still in this world. Sin crouches at the door. The devil prowls around like a roaring lion. Nations and leaders seek to persecute the Christian faith. Illness, disease, and suffering are all around and in every place. Death stares at you and you have an appointment with some day. Repent as now is the day of salvation. Turn from these things and do not be weighed down by them. Creation groans in anticipation of the day of redemption. Humble yourself and look to Christ and his mercy toward you.

During this Epiphany season you see God manifest or make himself known in these various appointed readings from his life. Last week it was the wedding at Cana where we saw him manifest his glory in showing mercy to his bride, the church, bestowing upon her his good gifts. Today in these two miracles it's something similar. Jesus reveals himself as the one who cleanses and heals. He enters the lives of people in this world and works according to his good and gracious will and through his means.

In your life, you go through this world and are confronted with God and his work. As a Christian the Lord places his word before you and calls you to faithfulness. He calls you close your mouth and obey what he teaches casting aside your own understanding and look to his wisdom and counsel. And that's fine and all well and good until things go south. It's one thing to say you believe God's word and think you believe that God hears and answers your prayers and then it's another thing when the cancer spreads, when you get laid off at work, when your kids leave the faith, or when you look at your life and see just how many people you have hurt and sinned against in the just the course of a few days. It's far easier to be like Naaman and go to God but get angry when you don't get the response you were wanting.

When you cry out to God and there appears to be no answer and no end to suffering then that's when the old man kicks in and starts formulating his own response to your life. He starts saying this like, "aren't the rivers in our own land far better than what God has commanded?" The devil and his lies start to creep into our hearts and like Adam and Eve we begin to start thinking, "Maybe God really didn't say." You turn God into an idol and force upon him your wants and desires. Your fallen will asserts itself and you pray, "my will be done." Then you do marvel at our faith, but you marvel because you look at ourselves and the false god you have created.

Cross and trial will come in this life and for some they will come more severe and more often than for others. What God has promised for you though is not that you will be great in this world or even that you will marvel at this life. No, he shows you in his world that the life of a Christian is taking up your cross and following him. To be a Christian is to hear the word of God and keep it. The marvelous thing about the centurion's faith that Jesus sees is the centurion knows exactly who he is and who the Lord is standing before him. His faith is great because Jesus, the object of his faith is great. That's an important thing for you too as you think about these things this morning. How great is your faith? In a sense, that's the wrong question to ask. The better question is "who is Jesus and what has he done?" A great faith never says, "my faith this" or "my faith that." A great faith instead looks outside of yourself in all times and circumstances and says, "Lord, have mercy upon me. Lord, I believe, help my unbelief. You are the Christ. Your will be done. You are my confidence. You are my righteousness. You are my hope. You are my salvation."

Your Lord, Jesus Christ, is here this day and he comes with healing. He comes under the roof of this place as you have him in his word and sacraments. An ancient prayer before receiving the Lord's Supper uses language from this reading. "I shall receive the bread of heaven and call upon the name of the Lord. I am not worthy that you should come under my roof, but speak the word only and my soul shall be healed. May the body of our Lord Jesus Christ preserve my soul unto life everlasting. Amen."

There's something great for you to marvel at you behold Jesus this day. The Lord has reached out his hand and placed it upon you. He has taken your sin upon himself and forgives you by the shedding of his blood. You are washed clean in the waters God has appointed for you which are the waters of Holy Baptism. Marvel at Jesus who has done wondrous things for you and still does.

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Like the centurion you are not worthy of anything the Lord has done or continues to do in your life, yet he is the Lord who has shown you mercy. He willingly comes to you through his means. In times of suffering, cross, and trial he is also with you and promises you that there will come the day when these things will end. You see these miracles as a glimpse, then, into your future when sin and all its wages come to end and there will be nothing but eternal joy. This is your hope as you see your Lord cleanse lepers and heal the servant of the centurion. This is the confidence you have as you go through life bearing the cross and saying, “Why should cross and trial grieve me?”

You know that even in those times when God may appear to be far off and not answering your prayers the Lord cares for you and in his time, he will accomplish his will for you, and it is good. God’s will for you is ultimately seen in your forgiveness, life, and salvation accomplished for you by Jesus. To cling to this and know God’s will is your salvation and pray, “thy will be done” is to have a great faith that sees all things differently. Even death has lost its sting, then, when you fix your eyes on Jesus crucified and risen. Paul Gerhardt put it so beautifully in the Hymn “Why Should Cross and Trial Grieve Me?” The words are also some of his last words and are inscribed on his grave, “Now in Christ, death cannot slay me, though it might, day and night, trouble and dismay me. Christ has made my death a portal from the strife of this life to his joy immortal!”

Your Lord Jesus is known this day and he knows you. God marvels at you as you behold him in faith. The Father sees Jesus who has atoned for you sin. For his sake you are righteous in his sight. That means absolutely everything as you sit here now and go from this place. Your Lord calls you as his own and he guides you through this life through his word. Always set that before you and go to where he has promised to be. Confess your sin and crucify that old man who would have you have it your way and instead go to God’s means of grace and find consolation and peace. Your Lord is made known, and he is the God of mercy toward you a sinner. You are not worthy that he should come under your roof, but he has come and is here because he has mercy on you. So, hear his word, take and eat his body and blood. Cling to Christ who has done all things well. Marvel at him who is your Lord, Jesus Christ who looks at you now and says, “Go; let it be done for you as you have believed” and know the day is coming when you will stand before him face to face in a glory beyond compare. On that day, the eternal day when you are raised from your grave you will marvel at you Lord and all that is yours forever.

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