

## "WAITING AND WATCHING"

### PART I

PALM SUNDAY (MARCH 25, 2018)

*Our Gospel story begins today with a parade, a naming and claiming of Jesus as the Messiah for the oppressed Jews of the Roman Empire. In Mark's Gospel, Chapter 11, verses 1-10, Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a borrowed colt, the people waving palms for him and singing their Hosanna songs for him:*

When they were nearing Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany on Mount Olives, he sent off two of the disciples with instructions: "Go to the village across from you. As soon as you enter, you'll find a colt tethered, one that has never yet been ridden. Untie it and bring it. If anyone asks, 'What are you doing?' say, 'The Master needs him, and will return him right away.'"

They went and found a colt tied to a door at the street corner and untied it. Some of those standing there said, "What are you doing untying that colt?" The disciples replied exactly as Jesus had instructed them, and the people let them alone.

They brought the colt to Jesus, spread their coats on it, and he mounted. The people gave him a wonderful welcome, some throwing their coats on the street, others spreading out rushes they had cut in the fields. Running ahead and following after, they were calling out,

Hosanna!

Blessed is he who comes in God's name!

Blessed the coming kingdom of our father David!

Hosanna in highest heaven!

*Listen to them! Listen to the crowds! Ugh! I need to cover my ears they are so loud, so obnoxious! We don't allow this sort of thing in Jerusalem, these spontaneous, **unauthorized** parades! We don't allow crowds and we don't allow the peasants to feel this much power. I am Longinus the Centurion, and it is my job to keep the peace. The 100 Roman soldiers under my command are depending on me to show and tell them what to do. You don't start out your first day in the Roman army as a centurion. I have earned this position of great responsibility and honor at great cost to my heart and my personal freedom. as I am unable to still the crowd, I am worried that this Jesus-mania is going to be my downfall.*

*I see that this is getting completely out of control. This man - they call him Jesus, King of the Jews—he is riding through the city gates on a colt like he is royalty or something! I have not been briefed that this is a permitted activity! We Centurions are watching this unfold before us, waiting for his people, his own Pharisees, to do something to stop it. The last thing we need is a riot; the last thing I want to do is unleash my war-dogs into this crowd. It will be a bloody sight and I will be blamed.*

*We and the Pharisees are helpless against all this noise, all this chaos. If Pilate gets wind of it, we are all in big trouble. We will be beaten for our insubordination, for letting this civil disorder take place. We will be denied our rations and forced to stand guard all night*

*on our feet. Maybe some of us will join the 3 legions-30,000 or more poor souls who have already been crucified to death in Palestine alone. I have no wish to be one of them! It's bad enough to have to witness and attend so many executions. I know how this will go down, and I want no part of it!*

*Why is this happening? Who IS this man that the people love him so? We see itinerants all the time, preachers and charlatans, salesmen and con artists. They come here to Jerusalem with talk of their gods, their elixirs, and their magic tricks. I've seen snake charmers and fortune tellers, too.*

*Usually we just take 'em down, throw them in our locked cells with the rats and the scorpions. They are soon forgotten and the people—these gullible people—are back in the marketplaces and Temple square looking for their next savior. Hmmph! NOTHING will save these people. They are ours—Rome OWNS them, and there is nothing that will change their lot.*

*So, what IS it about THIS one man? What makes him so special? They ADORE him. He has a smile that is broad enough to take them all in. He has a gentle pat for the heads of the hopeless children. He talks to the lepers, putting his hands on them! He consorts with tax collectors and prostitutes, with beggars and thieves alike. I have never seen anything like it.*

*His parade draws people wherever he goes--men who seem to adore him, hanging on his every word, and women who see to his every comfort. They fan him, and they feed him; they rub his swollen feet and put expensive nard on his sweaty forehead.*

*So, we wait. And we watch. And we shake our heads. Today, I tried to directly speak to him, to get him to quiet the unruly mob. I called out to him to keep the noise down, but he looked me right in the eye and said, "Nothing can stop the sound. Even the rocks and the trees are singing with the people for the Son of Man has arrived!"*

*Hmmph! The son of man! What nonsense is this? Everyone knows that Caesar, and only Caesar, is the son of man. Only he is god and this imposter will sign his own death warrant with his wild claims. I am waiting, waiting and watching, just waiting and watching for the order to come across my desk any hour now. And when it happens, it will not go well for him, this Jesus.*

*He has made important people angry, people much more important than I. He has tested Pontius Pilate, and Pilate is ruthless when he gets angry, let me tell you from first-hand experience. Jesus has made his own religious authorities lose face to their people, and that does not bode well for him either. I have heard them talking and whispering about having him arrested and executed.*

*Yes, the fire is burning hot in Jerusalem today, and someone is about to get burned. So, sing your songs, you foolish people! Wave*

*your palms! Shout your idle Hosannas. The King of the Jews is about to see his grand parade come to a very bitter end...*

## **"WAITING AND WATCHING"**

### **PART II**

**Mark 15:33-39**

*Following his trial before Pontius Pilate, Jesus is led away by the Roman guards to be crucified. The Centurion, Longinus, keeps watch by the cross. What he witnesses there transforms him forever.*

*From Mark's Gospel, chapter 15, beginning at verse 33:*

At noon the sky became extremely dark. The darkness lasted three hours. At three o'clock, Jesus groaned out of the depths, crying loudly, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

Some of the bystanders who heard him said, "Listen, he's calling for Elijah." Someone ran off, soaked a sponge in sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down."

But Jesus, with a loud cry, gave his last breath. At that moment the Temple curtain ripped right down the middle.

When the Roman captain standing guard in front of him saw that he had quit breathing, he said, "This has to be the Son of God!"

*I, Longinus the Centurion, have seen a lot of people die on the cross of Rome. I have witnessed them as they are dragged away to be crucified, and I have seen the whole range of human emotion in those last moments of life. I have heard so many confessions, pleas for mercy, angry vitriols, and crying jags that they mean nothing to me anymore.*

*But this day was different. This man was different. I am usually strong of will and hard of hearing the victims' cries, but not this time, not this crucifixion, not this day.*

*Jesus, my Jesus, what have they done to you? What have you done for these people you call your family? They scatter to the hills while you are arrested, interrogated, beaten, flogged, and made to drag your own cross to Golgotha, the skull hill of the dead and dying.*

*Why, Jesus, why did you let this happen to you? Surely someone could have aided your escape into the hills, far away from Pilate's wrath, far away from the Pharisees' scheming, far away from the crowd that turned on you just days after welcoming you through those very gates over there.*

*I heard them as they called for your blood and set a lying murderer free instead. Barabbas is not a good man! If anyone deserves to be nailed to a cross, it is him! Not this gentle one, not the one who was unjustly accused, who failed to defend himself before Pilate.*

*He is no monster, no real threat. He wasn't even strong enough to carry his own cross up the hill; we had to enlist a commoner standing in the street to help him.*

*Again, those eyes, those weary yet focused eyes, caught mine and I had a hard time swallowing. It was as if he was boring right into my heart, as though he had known me for all eternity, as if he knew that over the course of that day my life would be changed forever.*

*The surrounding mob was close to rioting, this time in hatred of him. I don't understand what he had done to inspire the people who paraded him on Sunday to call for his death on Friday. The people were yelling and screaming and throwing stones at us and at him; I wasn't even sure we were going to get him alive to the place of crucifixion!*

*Such hatred! Such a total lack of compassion. Yet I had seen Jesus earlier that week weeping, weeping for THEM. He had lamented out loud, "O, Jerusalem, my Jerusalem, if only you had known this day what would bring you peace." My heart in that moment lunged towards him as if to say, "I want peace. Can you give me peace?"*

*I was sickened to my stomach as some of another centurion's men made fun of Jesus, forcing him to wear a crown of thorns and tearing his bloody clothes from him. They mocked him, calling him, "King of the Jews!" as they spat on him and hit him repeatedly with sharp reeds. But I did nothing. It wasn't my place. Okay, well, truth be told, it seemed as though my feet were stuck in place and my mouth was too dry to form any words to make them stop.*

*I hated my job most days. I hated what I had become in the name of Caesar, but today, I hated my job even more. I have seen many criminals hung up to die, a lot of really bad men. I have seen women crucified for the smallest of offenses, really just for the sport of it. Crucifixion is a very effective tool for keeping the masses frightened and easily under Rome's control.*

*But not this day, not this time. And there was no justice for Jesus the Innocent and Righteous puppet, a gentle man of peace. I could not help but be affected.*

*They write about me as the first evangelist. I don't deserve such a badge of honor, not at all for I didn't stop any of it; I felt powerless even though I occupy a position of some power. I didn't stop the bullying, I didn't stop the beating, I didn't stop his struggling, and I didn't stop his death.*

*But as the cross was lifted and a new wave of pain broke out across his face, I just couldn't help myself. It was as though someone*

*inside me was speaking out through me. It was as if I learned how to pray to a God I was just meeting without anyone teaching me what I should say. I heard him cry out, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" It was the moment that everything changed for me, a pagan, a non-believer, a Roman soldier who finally GOT IT.*

*I heard myself whisper, "This man is righteous; he is God's son." And then I said it louder so that my compatriots could hear me: "Surely, this has to be the Son of God!" I was very excited, and they all looked at me with quizzical faces, wondering what in Caesar's world I was talking about!*

*I had heard it before! I had felt it before! Pilate himself declared Jesus to be innocent but he washed his hands of the accused's blood and sentenced him to death as the crowd yelled and screamed for it. Earlier in the week, I heard Jesus tell the daughters of Jerusalem not to weep for him, but rather to weep for themselves and their children. Such compassion I witnessed in the heart of the ill-fated man!*

*While on the cross, the wine mixed with myrrh was given to him, an elixir to lessen his pain. But he remained focused; it was as though he wanted to remain clear-headed, that he still had work to do. I think he forgave me, forgave all of us; it sounded that way. Or maybe that's just what I wanted to hear.*

*When he cried his last, I felt the earth shudder. Could this have been his God, now MY God, shuddering, too? Someone said the temple curtain tore in two. I didn't know what that meant at the time, but I felt my heart tear in two, so maybe that was it. The curtain was the heart of the worship place; my heart was the place that had been transformed that day up on windy Golgotha.*

*Now what am I to do? How will you judge me in the telling of my story? How will I make sure Jesus does not die in vain upon that cross?*

*Perhaps It Was So.*