

Meet the Man Who Nailed Jesus to the Cross

By Jim Day

When James Likens, former parish pastor in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, gives his presentation of *Canceled: The story of Jesus, St. Paul, and Julius, a Centurion*, it is not uncommon to see members of the audience wiping tears from their eyes. As one Illinois farmer said, "I've been a Christian for 80 years. This was the first time I think I really experienced the forgiveness of Jesus Christ in my heart." And what is this presentation? It is the powerful story of the man who nailed Jesus to the cross.

Likens, a former newspaper reporter and publisher, television reporter, and owner of JDL Video Productions in St. Louis, has created the story of Julius, the Centurion mentioned in Acts 27:1. ("When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belonged to the Imperial Regiment.")

His first presentation of this Centurion was done for Family Shield Ministries two years ago. Kay Meyer, a columnist for the *MetroVoice*, asked Likens to do a presentation at the ministries' annual fund raising dinner. After seeing the response of the audience, Likens set out to further develop this character and his story.

"I found it extremely interesting that in the first verse of Acts 27 a centurion was ordered to take prisoners to Rome. If a Roman soldier lost a prisoner he was executed without a trial," Likens recalled. "In verse three it says, 'The next day we landed at Sidon; and Julius, in kindness to Paul, allowed him to go to his friends so they might provide for his needs' I asked myself, 'Why would he have done this 'in kindness to Paul?'"

"The *Bible* is like a lace table cloth," Likens says. "It's held together by a finely woven network of thread and it's full of many holes. I've simply chosen to fill one of those holes."

And how does he fill that hole? This story, as told by Julius, reveals that St. Paul asked him that first night on the ship if he had ever heard of Jesus of Nazareth. Paul tells Julius that he was on his way to Damascus to persecute the followers of Jesus when Jesus confronted him on the road and asked, "Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?"

Julius says to Paul, "Sir, you might have persecuted His followers but before I was a Centurion I was a soldier in Jerusalem and it was my hand that held the hammer that nailed Him to the tree."

One thing helps Likens to truly become Julius in the mind of the audience, and that is his costume. "The costume I used at the Family Shield banquet was borrowed from a local church that does a Passion play ever year," Likens said. "It was made out of plastic and imitation leather. I knew if Julius was to have the ability to take an audience back 2000 years, I had to look like a real centurion."

Likens spent several months searching the Internet for just the right elements: the helmet, the breastplate, the sword. Much of the leather work he did himself. It takes him nearly 20 minutes to suit up before a presentation. The costume weighs nearly 40 pounds and is at times, as Likens says, "really uncomfortable. Those guys were really tough to have fought battles dressed like this."

The story that Likens tells has never been written down. "All I can say is that it happens," Likens said. "My presentation begins with an A Cappella version of *Were You There*. However, I've rewritten it so it is based upon the concept of



'Were you there when 'I' crucified your Lord.' When my wife begins the soundtrack CD I close my eyes and listen. I take a deep breath and I exhale Jim Likens. When I inhale, Julius arrives and he is with me throughout the story. I simply surrender and let him talk."

During Holy Week, Likens did the chapel service for Lutheran Hour Ministries on Maundy Thursday. The Rev. Dr. Ken Klaus, speaker of the Lutheran Hour observed: "One cannot view this profound presentation without being changed. You will not come away the same person you were when you entered."

Does he see himself as an actor? "No," Likens said. "I see myself simply as a messenger of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a way that makes it hard for a person to avoid having a very close encounter with Jesus." A sample of his presentation can be seen at www.spiritusgladius.com/julius.

While Julius is the teller of the story, the real story is what St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Colossians, "*When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code (the Law), with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; He took it away, nailing it to the cross.*" (Col. 2:13-14). As Julius brings his presentation to a close, he tells the audience that they will receive a nail as they leave.

"Take this nail and put it in a place you see it every day," Julius says, "to remind yourself that the Law which condemned you has been canceled, taken away, and nailed to the cross. You, my dear friends, have been set free."

At present, Likens is looking for a booking agent or management team who can promote and book appearances both locally and nationally.

Julius is available for bookings by emailing him at julius@canceledcode.org. Or you can call Jim Likens at (314) 308-5203.