

The Lutheran Church of the Atonement
Florissant, Missouri
Proper 23 -- Year C
October 8-9, 2022
Second Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c
Second Timothy 2:8-15
St. Luke 17:11-19

Perhaps, you've heard this story before. I'm sure it has been repeated (in various forms) in thousands of sermons, although -- to the best of my recollection -- not by me. The story apparently dates to the 1930s, although the time and the place vary slightly with each telling. Then, again, those variations, if anything, suggest that there is some authenticity to the story. In broad outlines, the story does go back to a time in the 1930s, when the Communist Party in the old Soviet Union was wanting to eliminate what little influence the Orthodox Church still had and was subjecting its citizens to mandatory hour-long lectures, discrediting the Christian Faith and extolling the triumph of atheism. One such lecture was delivered by the editor of *Pravda*, who was a prominent member of the Soviet Union's Politburo. After addressing a huge crowd in an auditorium in the city now known as Kyiv and believing that he had thoroughly debunked the Christian Faith, he asked (almost rhetorically) if anyone had any questions. And, one elderly priest stood up, turned around, faced the assembly, and simply said, "Christos Voskres! Christ is Risen!" And, the entire assembly shouted back, "He is Risen, indeed!" And, then, they silently filed out of the auditorium.

In our Second Lesson today from Paul's second letter to his protégé, Timothy, Paul writes that, although he is chained up in his prison cell, which is what they did with prisoners in those days, "the Word of God is not chained, is not "bound," is not "fettered," as one older translation puts it. But, Paul -- well-versed in Scripture -- did not come up with this idea on his own. He could trace it all the way back to the Prophet Isaiah, who insisted that God's Word would never come up

void, empty, but would always accomplish its purposes, the same Isaiah who declared that "the Word of our God will stand forever."

Perhaps, if you've watched some of the Cardinals baseball games on TV this year (or even listened on the radio) you've noticed -- and even appreciated -- a series of new ads from a Christian media group called "He Gets Us," ads dramatizing how Jesus can understand and relate to our contemporary circumstances, because He's been through the same circumstances Himself. In other words, Jesus "gets us;" He understands us; He identifies with us. (Good incarnational theology, by the way!) But, I mention those ads, only because there is now a group trying to pressure the Cardinals to discontinue those ads and the related "he gets us" messages which appear from time-to-time behind home plate.

But, as efforts go to silence the Word of God, that one is pretty tame. Then, again, participants in our own Lutheran Campus Ministry here in St. Louis report that students who admit to being Christian are subject to increasing ridicule and scorn.

But, ridicule and scorn is the least of the worries of hundreds of thousands of Christians around the world, ...in dozens of countries where, not just social or academic pressures, but government policy and extremist groups strive to silence the Word of God. In nations like North Korea, Yemen, Libya, Somalia, and (now, again) Afghanistan, owning a Bible is illegal or virtually illegal, and possessing a Bible can even cost you your life. In some nations, like Saudi Arabia and the Maldives, tourists and foreigners may own Bibles in their own languages, but dare not share their Faith, publicly or in the presence of non-Christians. There is general agreement among human rights groups that there are 52 nations, where sharing the Bible as the Word of God is highly restricted, or even

dangerous. And, then, there are those regions, where owning or sharing a Bible is technically legal, but where marauding bands of political extremists or religious fanatics don't much care what is or isn't legal. Make no mistake, there is no shortage of those who would "chain up" the Word of God, who would silence the Word of God.

Indeed, we need look no further than the so-called court, which bound up the incarnate Word of God and attempted to silence Him by putting Him to death. As John's Gospel reports, they "seized Jesus and bound Him." When they didn't like His answers, they "struck Him." And, when He told the governor that He had "come into the world to bear witness to the truth," the governor proceeded with the death sentence. Surely, they thought, that will shut Him up, that will silence Him forever. If anything should silence someone, death will, every time -- or so they thought.

I suspect that there are times when those of us who are deeply committed to the life of faith and the work of the Church may become discouraged. Worship attendance declines; volunteers become scarce; young people drift away; commitment wanes.... Well, if anyone who was deeply committed to the life of faith and to the work of the Church had every reason to be discouraged, it would have been Paul, chained up in prison, having been abandoned by some former colleagues, undermined and even opposed by others, and utterly reliant on a few dear friends, simply for food and water. And, yet, having encountered the risen Christ, Paul had full confidence that, because Jesus was risen from the dead, every attempt to chain up and silence the Word of God, even the incarnate word of God, could not and cannot prevail. And, so, Paul begins his entire charge to Timothy and bases his certainty that God's Word cannot be "chained" with these words: "Remember Christ Jesus, raised from the dead."

These are the words that enable persecuted believers in places like Afghanistan, North Korea, and central Arica to cling to the Word of God, which cannot be bound. These are the words that enable college students to trust that God's Word will not prove empty, but accomplish its purposes. These are the words that ensure those subjected to all manner of atheistic propaganda that "the Word of our God will stand forever." These are the words that embolden any of us confronted with attempts to silence the Word of God: "Remember Christ Jesus, risen from the dead."

Or, as one elderly priest who stood up and faced the assembly declared: "Christos Voskres!...Christ is Risen!" and, all God's people shouted back: "He is risen, indeed!" Amen