

But the Word of God Is Not Chained
II Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19; Psalm 66:5-12

Psalm 66:5-12

⁵Come and see what God has done:

he is awesome in his deeds among mortals.

⁶He turned the sea into dry land;

they passed through the river on foot.

There we rejoiced in him, ⁷who rules by his might forever,
whose eyes keep watch on the nations—

let the rebellious not exalt themselves.

⁸Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard,

⁹who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip.

¹⁰For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried.

¹¹You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs;

¹²you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through
water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.

Luke 17:11-19

¹¹On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between
Samaria and Galilee. ¹²As he entered a village, ten lepers approached
him. Keeping their distance, ¹³they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master,
have mercy on us!”

¹⁴When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the
priests.” And as they went, they were made clean.

¹⁵Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back,
praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet
and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.

¹⁷Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? ¹⁸Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”

¹⁹Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

II Timothy 2:8-15

⁸Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David—that is my gospel, ⁹for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal.

But the word of God is not chained.

¹⁰Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.

¹¹The saying is sure:

If we have died with him,
we will also live with him;

¹²if we endure,
we will also reign with him;

if we deny him,
he will also deny us;

¹³if we are faithless,
he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.

¹⁴Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening.

¹⁵Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.

The Sermon

One of the questions that gets asked in career counseling is one that I was asked as a required part of preparation for ordination when I went through career counseling 30 years ago—by the way, it was conclusively decided that I should be an insurance claims adjuster—

a question I still remember three decades later is this:

Dreaming as freely as you can: if money and circumstances were no object, given your mental and physical health, and your particular talents and abilities and interests, what would you most like to do with the time you are given on this earth?

What would you want to do with all that you are and all that you have—no magical powers or anything, just being the person you are and having the time you have—if you had absolute freedom to do it?

Of course, in order to imagine the answer to that question, you necessarily have to notice another one, namely:

what is it that constrains you from being and doing what you would if you could?

The wizened, seasoned minister said to young Timothy, “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David. That is my gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal.

“But the word of God is not chained.”

The older pastor knows what it feels like—knows what it *is*—to be chained like a criminal and treated worse than a dog.

He's also had the experience, in what must have been a thrilling and devastating moment of joy and astonishment and gratitude and awe, of having come to believe.

What do you imagine he has in mind when he says, “Remember Jesus Christ...that is my gospel”?

Among the things he *may* have in mind might be the story of how Jesus healed ten people who were all suffering from a disease that was not only destructive to their bodies, not only made their own condition repugnant to them, but diminished their lives in ways and to degrees that were almost impossible to quantify:

kept them condemned to a life of isolation and unfair judgement and unearned shame; made them repulsive to other people; taught them to keep their distance even from those who would give a handshake or a hug, even from someone who would come to love and heal.

When they saw him and shouted for his mercy, there was no loyalty oath or statement of faith required.

He didn't ask them what their resumes were,
 or whether and where and how successfully they were educated;
 what their politics were—who they would have voted for,
 or which pundits they thought were great
 and which ones they thought were idiots;
 what their nationalities were,
 or whether they were documented;
 where their ancestry came from;
 or what their gender identity or their marital status was.

He asked nothing. He just healed them.

God did whatever God wanted to do for those ten. The only question was why nine didn't come back to praise God—and of no small irony was the fact that the one who did come back wasn't one of Jesus' people, in family or nationality or religion.

But each of those ten, whether they thought to go back and praise God at that moment or not, nevertheless now has the obligation and the opportunity to decide what they will do with their newfound freedom.

“Remember Jesus Christ...that is my gospel.”

What do you think that means? What does it mean to you?

When someone mentions Jesus' name, what image comes to your mind? What, specifically, about him are you remembering?

We are being invited to consider our own dedication and explore the depths and heights of our gratitude.

For what are you most grateful, and how do those things for which you are thankful make you want to embody and enact your dedication to being a follower of Jesus?

What is the most powerful force in your life?—and believe me, that is not a trick question: forces vast and mundane exert power in our lives.

What constrains you from doing what you would if you could?

And what can God do with you that goes beyond your own powers and abilities?

And in light of that possibility, what do you really want your life to be?

What truth about you—about who God made you to be—remains hidden for now, but is waiting to be sung to the world?

There is an old fairy tale from my paternal ancestry, the Serbs, called the Emperor's Goat's Ears. Naturally, one might assume that means the emperor had a goat and we're going to hear a story about the ears on that goat. The story goes:

There was an emperor who had goat's ears, but he didn't want anybody to know about it, so whenever he got a haircut, he'd kind of test the barber and say, "What do you see back there?"

And the barber would usually say, "By golly, you've got goat's ears," and then that barber wouldn't be seen again for...quite some time.

Eventually there was a barber who was invited to cut the emperor's hair, but he had noticed that every time the emperor got a haircut, there was one less barber pole in town, so obviously something was going on there. So, he sent his apprentice instead.

And the apprentice hair cutter was working on the emperor's head, and the emperor said, "What do you see back there?" and the young apprentice said: "Nothing."

So, on he went, but how do you hold onto a secret like that? So, the apprentice told the barber he worked for that he had learned something, but he couldn't tell anybody about it. And the barber said, "Either tell me, or if you don't trust me, tell somebody you do trust; but if there's nobody on earth you feel like you can trust, go out into the field, dig a little hole, and shout it three times into the earth, and then put the dirt back in and forget about it."

So, the young apprentice did that. Later, some shoots grew out of the ground at exactly that spot, and some shepherds came along, and one of them took a shoot out of the ground, put it up to his mouth to blow like a

whistle, and when he did, instead of a whistle, the words came out: “The emperor has goat’s ears.”

Some kids heard about it and went and got another shoot, fashioned it into a pipe, and blew into it, and it said, “The emperor has goat’s ears.”

Well, this got back to the emperor, who sent goons out to bring the apprentice in, and he explained the whole story, and the emperor said, “I don’t believe a word of that; you’ve been out telling people about my ears.” And the apprentice said, “I can show you.” So they went out to the spot, and there was another shoot there coming up out of the ground, and the emperor blew into it and it said “The emperor has goat’s ears.”

And the emperor said to the apprentice, You’re going to be OK, because I have just learned something, and this is the moral of the story: that nothing in this world can remain hidden forever.¹

The heavens are telling the glory of God, says Psalm 19;
the firmament proclaims God’s handiwork.

Day *pours forth* speech to the next day,
night declares knowledge to night.

There is no “speech,” there aren’t words; their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world. (Psalm 19:1-4)

When Jesus was coming into Jerusalem

in the event we commemorate on Palm Sunday,
the people were “praising God joyfully with a loud voice
for all the deeds of power that they had seen,”
and some of the Pharisees said to Jesus,

“You need to order them to cut that out right now.”

And Jesus said, “Let me tell you something:

if these were silent, the stones would shout out.” (Luke 19:37-40).

Nothing on earth made or done by God stays hidden forever.

What truth about you—about who God made you to be, and what the Spirit has you wanting most to be able to do—remains hidden for now, but is waiting to be revealed to the world?

Think of the coincidences that have brought you to this moment.

In 1995, on a whim because there was nothing better to do, I accompanied Vivian to an event in which I had no interest whatsoever, heard Fred Craddock preach, and had my whole life changed, which has led in a bright line drawn with a Sharpie directly from that entirely accidental half hour to me being where I am right now, in a place and circumstance I literally could not have imagined in 1995.

In 1989 I messed up a travel plan I'd been given, which I later re-read and it was clear as a bell what I had been supposed to do, but I had totally botched it, and as a result of making the wrong plans met your director of music, to whom I have been married for 27 years.

Look at who you are, how you got to be here.

Your biological parents met. Their biological parents met. What astronomical odds have been beaten, time and again, to result in you being who you are and where you are right now?

God spoke and there was light; God spoke and there was life (Genesis 1:14-15 and 1:20).

God knit you together in the depths of the earth, beheld your unformed substance when you were being made in secret (Psalm 139:13-16).

Before the foundation of the world, God had already chosen you (Ephesians 1:4).

What is the beautiful truth that will not be denied about who God made you to be, and what God empowers you to do to embody the love of Jesus Christ?

We are being invited to consider our own dedication and explore the depths and heights of our gratitude,

which invites us to imagine who we most want to be, and what we would find the most joy in doing;

invites us to think about the freedom and power of the Word of God, unchained and uncontainable, and what it can do in our lives, and what it can do *with* our lives, even when we ourselves live within certain constraints;

invites us to remember that God can do, and does, amazing things for God's people, meaning we are free to live lives of joy, because living generously in God's light is its own astonishingly rich reward.

God can do through you and me whatever God wants to do through us, because the Word of God is not, and never can be chained.

What would it look like if you took that unchained love and set it free in your life?

Come and see what God has done.

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¹ David Falkyan, ed., *Serbian Fairy Tales* (Athena: 2004), 9-12