

Elizabeth Propst:

Good morning and welcome to morning prayers.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Elizabeth Propst:

Please rise, as you're able, and join me in reading our Psalm 130, found on page 65 of your black Appleton Psalter.

Congregation:

130?

Elizabeth Propst:

Yes, sir. Out of the depths, have I called to you, oh God. Hear my voice. Let your ears consider well the voice of my supplication.

Congregation:

If you were to note what is done amiss, oh God, who could stand?

Elizabeth Propst:

For there is forgiveness with you, therefore you shall be feared.

Congregation:

I wait for you, oh God, my soul waits for you. In your word is my hope.

Elizabeth Propst:

My soul waits for you more than sentries for the morning, more than sentries for the morning.

Congregation:

Oh Israel, wait upon God, for with God there is mercy.

Elizabeth Propst:

With God, there is plenteous redemption. God shall redeem Israel from all their sins.

Choir:

(singing)

Eva Stathi Misho:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Eva Stathi Misho:

The reading is from the letter of the apostle Paul to the Romans, chapter eight, verses 38 and 39.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

"Oh my God, I'm so tired.", my friend said, as we are running around the neighborhood. A passerby was shocked to hear a call to the name of God, and stopped to ask us, "Whose donors are you?" After we responded with a sinister look on his face he said, "I see your parents are teaching you about God." We ran away terrified. I was seven years old in dictatorial communist Albania, where any form of religion was outlawed, and a little child would get the whole family in trouble for just saying, "Oh my God."

Albania had the harshest and longest dictatorial communist regime in Eastern Europe, lasting 45 years, from 1945 to 1990. And in 1967, Albania became the first European country to declare itself an atheistic country in its constitution. Many people, from every religion, were sent to prison, where torture was common and the death rate was high.

The day of the incident, I went home thinking, "Did I put my family in trouble? Who is God? What is so dangerous about God? Why can't we talk about God?" I had watched anti-religious propaganda movies where clerics were the bad guys, or as we called them, the enemy of the people. I'd also read slogans like, Religion Is An Old Lady's Tale or The Opium Of People. However, I had never questioned the propaganda. Was their depiction of God true? I had to find out. I knew this was the kind of conversation that I could not have with just about anyone.

I went to my most trusted person, my grandmother. Initially, Grandma was hesitant and worried to have this conversation with a young child. But when she saw my eagerness, she agreed, and made me promise not to tell anyone. She told me that, if people outside of our home found out, the whole family would be in danger. My grandmother was my first minister and spirits were a road map. We didn't have a Bible or any religious items. We had our memory and faith. Grandma's God was different from the one of the communist propaganda. She would teach me how to pray, and tell me stories of a God who performed miracles, calmed storms, and healed the sick. A God who loved us so much that sacrificed the only son, Jesus, to save us. A God who is alive and active.

Oh, how much I wanted to share with my friends, the stories my grandma was telling me. I wanted them to experience God's love, but I couldn't. I knew the consequences would be damaging to my family. My grandmother though, will tell me, 'Eva, words are not the only way we can show God's love to others.' Knowing that God's love is active, and that I can express the love to others through my actions, gave me freedom and hope in the midst of persecution. The communist regime, who closed the houses of worship, they could forbid us from practicing religion, but they could not stop us from loving one another, and above all, they could not stop God from loving us.

The words of the apostle Paul to the Romans read, "nothing would separate us from the love of God." These words gave me hope under the communist regime, and have done so throughout my life. It has been reassuring to know, that whatever it is that makes us go distant from God's love, fear, anxiety, depression, loneliness, even a communist regime, will never, ever, stop God from loving us. Let us pray.

Dear God, thank you. Thank you for loving us no matter what. My prayer today is that we also love one another, just as you love us. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Elizabeth Propst:

Now, please rise, as you're able, and join me in the prayer that Christ taught us, saying...

Congregation:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Elizabeth Propst:

Now, please join us in seeing today's hymn, Lord God of Morning and Night, number 39 in your crimson hymnal.

Congregation/Choir:

(singing)

Elizabeth Propst:

Christ has no hands in this world but your hands, and no voice in this world but your voice, and the work of justice and of love is our responsibility, and our gift on this day and on all days. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.