

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
Reformation Day (observed)
October 27, 2024
Revelation 14:6-7

An Eternal Gospel to Proclaim

Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. 7 And he said with a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water." (Revelation 14:6-7 ESV)

In the name of Jesus, the only Savior of the world,

Why in the world was this text chosen as a reading for Reformation Day? Well, believe it or not, beginning already in Luther's lifetime, people identified this angel of the Revelation with . . . the messenger of the Reformation, namely, Martin Luther. They saw Luther as this angel having an eternal gospel to proclaim to every nation. As early as 1522, just five years after Luther posted the 95 Theses, a man named Michael Stiefel wrote a poem called, "On the Christ-Formed, Properly Grounded Teaching of Doctor Martin Luther." In the opening stanza Stiefel says, "John wrote for us of an angel who would set forth God's Word with complete clarity." And there Stiefel plays on Luther's name, because the German word he uses for "clarity" is *lauter*. *Lauter*, *Luter*.

That was in 1522. In 1546, at Luther's funeral, the preacher, Johannes Bugenhagen, made a similar comparison. He said: "This angel who says, 'Fear God and give him the honor,' was Dr. Martin Luther. And what is written here, 'Fear God and give him the honor,' are the two parts of Dr. Martin Luther's doctrine, the Law and the Gospel, through which all of Scripture is unlocked and Christ, our righteousness and eternal life, is recognized." So from then on, the linkage was established: The angel of Revelation 14 became associated with the person of Martin Luther. And that's how this text came to be a reading for Reformation Day.

But were they right? Were Stiefel and Bugenhagen justified in seeing Luther in this vision from Revelation? And how does this apply to us today?

Before we answer those questions, however, let us first see how this text fits into its context in the Book of Revelation. In the chapters leading up to our text, John has described an end-time battle, in which powerful enemies have been waging war against God's people: The dragon attacks the woman and her child and the rest of her offspring. A beast comes out of the

sea. A beast comes out of the earth. They would deceive the world and destroy the saints. This vision depicts the very real battle that has been going on against the church throughout the entire New Testament era. John and the believers back then were feeling it. They endured the pain of persecution. Intense hostility from both the Roman Empire and the Jewish synagogue. Both civil and religious forces were lined up against the early Christians. They were in the midst of a battle. That's what John has been describing by means of the vivid images that characterize this book.

But then John sees something else. He sees the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with Him the 144,000. This is a picture of Christ and His church—the whole lot, the full number, nobody missing. They bear His name on their foreheads, and they're singing the new song. This is saying that the church, redeemed by Christ, will endure in spite of persecution.

Next John says, "Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth." John has seen angels before in this book, and now he's seeing another. Note though that the Greek word "angel" can have kind of a double meaning in Revelation. To be sure, it can refer to the heavenly beings we usually think of as an angel. But "angel" can also mean simply "messenger." Any messenger, whether heavenly or earthly. And a pastor is an "angel," of sorts, a "messenger." An earthly messenger with a heavenly message. And the angel that John sees flying in this vision, while no doubt a heavenly being, has everything to do with the proclamation of the message here on earth.

Our text says the angel is "flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim." This angel is smack-dab in the middle of the sky, like the sun shining directly overhead. In other words, in the midst of the darkness of this world, when it looks like the light is about to be extinguished, snuffed out, God reassures us: No, the darkness shall not overcome it. The gospel light will continue to shine brightly. After all, this gospel comes from heaven. It's God's gospel. It's not man-made, so man cannot destroy it. It's an eternal gospel. It will last forever. And God means to have it proclaimed. His messengers will preach this gospel to every nation, tribe, language, and people.

What is this eternal gospel that is being proclaimed? To use the language of Revelation, it's about "the Lamb who was slain," the one who "by his blood ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation." It's about "him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood." It's about Jesus Christ, "the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth." He, Jesus, our exalted Lord, comes to us and says: "Fear not. I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades."

This good news about Jesus is the eternal gospel that is going to be proclaimed. All the Caesars of this world, all the Sanhedrins, the beast of the sea and the beast of the earth, all the

civil and religious powers that try to extinguish the gospel—they cannot stop it. That’s the message of this text in Revelation. And it certainly was fulfilled in the case of Luther and the Reformation. It is not restricted to Luther alone, of course. This text gives encouragement to the church in all ages. But it was fulfilled in a very notable way in the case of Luther.

Luther was in a battle. He sensed it deeply. He felt the assaults of the devil. He faced fierce opposition. Both civil and religious powers lined up against him. Luther was excommunicated by the pope and declared an outlaw by the emperor. And the reason was precisely because Luther was God’s “angel,” His messenger. He restored the gospel to its place of prominence, flying directly overhead, like the sun shining in mid-heaven, the bright light of its noonday brilliance dispersing the clouds that had shrouded the message in darkness.

For Luther, that eternal gospel was too precious a thing for him to compromise or back off. He would rather be criticized as obstinate than to yield in the pure proclamation of the gospel. What gave him the courage to confess the faith so boldly? The gospel itself. Luther knew how much the pure gospel meant to him, freeing his conscience from the burden that had long weighed him down. And so Luther placed his confidence in God as his mighty fortress, no matter the threats of pope or emperor. “And take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife, though these all be gone, our vict’ry has been won; the Kingdom ours remaineth.”

An eternal gospel to proclaim—that was the key. To keep that gospel pure and undefiled, so that it could be preached for the salvation of every nation—this was the driving force behind the Lutheran insistence on pure doctrine and the sound practice that flows from it. That’s really the story of the Reformation and of Luther in particular. So, yes, Stiefel and Bugenhagen were justified in seeing Luther as the angel of Revelation 14, the angel flying directly overhead, having an eternal gospel to proclaim to every nation.

Now what about us? What can we take from all of this today? First, realize that we are in a battle. The beast of the sea and the beast of the earth are still attacking the saints. The church is facing increased hostility in our society. Some politicians openly advocate that they want to punish churches that hold to biblical teachings. Among the American people as a whole, organized religion is out. Christianity is in disfavor. The number of Americans identifying as Christians has been decreasing. And the number of Americans saying they have no religious affiliation at all is increasing. And the numbers among young adults are even more alarming.

Friends, we are in a battle. Will we give in? Will we give up? No, we will continue to confess Christ. For we have an eternal gospel to proclaim. Truth does not change. The message does not change. And people do not change, either. All people need what only the gospel delivers, namely, the forgiveness of sins for Christ’s sake. Eternal life. The sure hope of salvation. And the Lutheran church, above all, should set forth this gospel with great courage and great clarity. Like the sun shining in mid-heaven. Like an angel flying directly overhead.

So take courage today. God has not abandoned His little flock. Jesus died for you and for all people. That shows how much God is committed to you and His church and to the proclamation of the gospel. Christ rose victorious in the fight, and right now our Lord is ruling all things for the good of His church. The angel is still flying directly overhead. The clear light of the gospel is shining brightly, even in these gray and latter days. Take heart. We have an eternal gospel to give us hope. We have an eternal gospel to give us courage. And we have an eternal gospel to proclaim. God grant that we do to the glory of His name. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

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