

# “An Eternal Gospel To Proclaim”

Revelation 14:6-7

October 28, 2012

Reformation Day

Remember pep rallies in high school? I'm sure there were a couple of good ones this weekend prior to the big Crosstown Classic. Pep rallies are a time to stir people up for their team, praise the top players, and get ready for the contest.

Today is Reformation Day. Often, this day turns out to be more of a Lutheran pep rally than a church festival. We celebrate our Lutheranism by puffing out our chests, putting out our rarely used red paraments, singing “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” and praising Martin Luther. One might understand it to be Lutheran giddiness (if Lutherans can indeed *be* giddy) that many have understood our text for today as a prophesy of Martin Luther. In an attempt to praise him as the top player on our “team”, people think that He is the angel, flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim. Is this true or is this going a bit far?

It might be true, if understood incorrectly. This day and this text are all about the Gospel to be proclaimed. That is to be the focus, not the angel. This Good News is eternal. It is not just for us in our present age. It is for all time – in the beginning, now, and forever. This Gospel is universal. It is not just for us Lutherans. No one is excluded from its promises. It is for all people who dwell on the earth – every nation and tribe and language and people.

But this Good News doesn't start off sounding much like good news. “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come.” This sounds pretty scary. Why should we fear God? His judgment is coming and, in fact, has already arrived. He will bring perfect justice to our world corrupted by sin. We think that's what we want for ourselves and for our world – perfect justice. We think we can make it if everything was just. After all, we haven't killed anyone, committed adultery, or stolen anything. We are basically good people who try to be kind other people and do good for our families, schools, and communities.

But then we take a closer look at what God's perfect justice involves. He not only judges and condemns the big sins in our lives, but He judges and condemns every aspect of sin in our lives. He condemns what we might think are the petty insignificant sins we commit but which are deadly serious to a holy God. He judges, not only our actions, but our words and even our thoughts, desires, and intentions.

If that weren't enough, God judges us on the basis of the good we do or, in many cases, don't do. We can try as hard as we want to live the life which God intends and obey His Law, but which, as sinful human beings, we cannot attain. The holy God has established holiness as the standard by which all of us will be judged. On our own, we don't stand a chance. As our epistle reading for today says, "Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." (Rom. 3:19-20)

In other words, we all have to just shut up in our defense of ourselves and our actions. No rationalization can be made for our sins. No excuses can be made for our failure to do good. No matter how good we are or might think we are, "by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight." (Rom. 3:20) On our own, we all stand guilty and condemned. Later on in the same chapter of Revelation, it says that those who are judged and condemned "will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever." (Rev. 14:10-11)

This was the judgment which Martin Luther knew and felt in his life as a monk. He lived for a long time in guilt and despair at the thought of this judgment since he was acutely aware of his sin. This is the judgment which many today know and feel, despite our society's efforts to be non-judgmental in all it does. I think that's why there is such an effort to support non-judgmentalism. This is nothing any of us ever wants to face and experience.

So where is the Gospel here? Where is the Good News? It seems only to be about God's judgment. Can God's judgment be construed in any way to be "good news"? Amazingly, it can and it is.

What is "judgment"? The word basically means the decision of a judge. We have seen the decision of God against sinners. But is there any other decision? Our epistle reading describes another judgment: "For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith." (Rom. 3:22-25)

God justifies people – that is, declares them to be "not guilty." That is the judge's decision. It is not based on the fact that anyone is not guilty by nature. The decision is made on the basis of the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. The Perfectly Innocent One – Jesus Christ – took the sin of the world for all people of all time to the cross and became the Completely Guilty One. In dying on the cross, Jesus redeemed – paid the price for – sinners – all sinners of all time in every nation and tribe and language and people in God's judicial system. Through this payment, a holy God is able to declare sinners to be not guilty. The receipt for that payment and proof of purchase was His resurrection from the dead.

This "not guilty" declaration is something that people receive by faith. Most of us had that faith given to us in Holy Baptism. Others may have received it by hearing the Word of God. We have already been judged and declared to be "not guilty" for the sake of Jesus. But there's more than that. We are not simply "not guilty", but we are declared to be holy in God's sight. The "righteousness of God" spoken of in our epistle which Luther thought was God's holiness by which He condemns us, is actually the holiness which God by which He saves us. He gives to us His holiness for Christ's sake that we might be in His presence for all eternity.

Therefore, we have nothing to fear in God's judgment. The Gospel of John says this judgment has already taken place. "Whoever believes in him is not condemned (judged), but whoever does not

believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." (John 3:18) This is the eternal Gospel which the angel proclaims: God has judged us and declared us to be "not guilty" by Christ's redemption and to be righteous and holy by Christ's righteousness.

The benefits of this redemption are not some pie in the sky pipedreams somewhere in the future. Jesus says that they are already ours right now by faith. Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life." (John 5:24) Death and our resurrection from death are the means by which we realize and receive what is already ours: eternal life in the joy and peace of God's heavenly kingdom.

This is the eternal Gospel which this angel proclaims. But is this angel Luther? In a way, it is. The Greek word for *angel* simply means "messenger", a job which angels often performed. However, in the first several chapters of Revelation where John writes seven letters to seven churches, he addresses them to the "angels" of those churches – the messengers called to proclaim in those churches. In other words, these are pastors. Martin Luther was a pastor – a messenger - who was used by God to reform His Church, bring the true Gospel message to light again, and proclaim that message to the entire world in his sermons, his teaching, his writings, and in his translation of the Bible into German, the language of the people.

But this text and this angel is more than just Martin Luther. It is every pastor and every messenger sent out by God to "every nation and tribe and language and people". We have the same life-saving and life-giving Gospel to proclaim in our present day that Luther and others had in years gone by. Jesus summarizes it in His preaching in Mark 1: "The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" This is a message of Law and Gospel; Repentance and Salvation; the Bad News of eternal condemnation for those who don't repent and

believe and the Good News of redemption and eternal life for those who, by God's grace, repent and believe.

“Fear God...because the hour of his judgment has come”? Only if you have refused to repent of your sin and have rejected His grace. Otherwise, repenting of your sins and trusting in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, rejoice that His judgment HAS come and that you ALREADY have been declared to be “not guilty” by Jesus’ redemption and holy in His sight by virtue of His righteousness. “Worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water” because in His final judgment, He will cast down Satan and all evil and will establish righteousness and peace forever. Proclaim that that all might hear. Pray that all might believe. Amen.