

<sup>6</sup>Then I saw another angel flying in the middle of the sky. He had the everlasting gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth, to every nation, tribe, language, and people. <sup>7</sup>He said with a loud voice:

Fear God and give him glory,

because the hour of his judgment has come.

Worship him who made the sky, the earth, the sea, and the springs of water.

### **Eternal Gospel?**

This last week I had a friend call asking about a funeral. He wanted to know, “If I were to die, would you come and preach at my funeral?” My first response was, “I’ll have to check my schedule, when were you planning again?” I wasn’t serious but I did go on to ask about life in general and whether or not he was planning ahead. His question did get me thinking about my funeral. If I were to die, what would I want said? And then the study began for Reformation Sunday. If I wanted everyone to remember me as an angel flying overhead proclaiming the gospel then Revelation 14:6-7 just might be perfect.

Now why would anyone imagine that would be a good idea? Well, Germans are an interesting group of people and Johannes Bugenhagen did just that for Martin Luther. I’m convinced that this is one of the reasons why we’re reading Revelation 14 today. I’m no Martin Luther by any means. He accomplished more in a day than I can in my life. But I’m not so certain about the application that Bugenhagen made from John’s vision in Revelation. Technically speaking the word “angel” could refer to pastor or any messenger for that matter. But this angel just doesn’t sound like Luther. Nor would Luther like the attention.

If he found out that we were celebrating him he’d be rolling over in his grave. The Reformation is not about Luther, but a restoration of the word. And Luther would have agreed that he was just one among many messengers who faithfully proclaimed the eternal gospel.

But this still doesn’t sound much like Luther. First, the lesson is short, just two verses. And Luther was long winded. Second is the content is all wrong for Luther. An angel flying in the middle of the sky has an everlasting gospel to proclaim to all people. It’s not the action but the content of his gospel that’s concerning, *“Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of judgment has come. Worship him who made the sky, the earth, the sea, and the springs of water.”*

Lutherans like to distinguish between Law and Gospel. The law is the commands of God, the do this, don’t do that. The law dictates the consequences of our actions and what our sin deserves. The gospel on the other hand is full of the promises of God. Baptism now saves you. (1 Peter 3:21) Take and eat, given for you for the forgiveness of sins. (Matthew 26:27) God so loved the world. The Gospel asks nothing, demands nothing and yet gives everything. But the OT and NT believers didn’t always make such a distinction. Sometimes the Law is applied to the Torah the first five books and the Torah is full of law and gospel. But that’s not quite the same as this Gospel.

The gospel literally means – good news. And here we have it twice he has a good news to good news (announce). This good news refers to commands and judgment. Fear God and this fear is where we get the word phobia. It means to be afraid. This is the good news the angels announce, “*Don’t be afraid.*” To argue only for respect ignores the context of our lesson. This isn’t just reverence and respect this is, “Be afraid because judgment has come.” This is the announcement before the final judgment of all mankind.

The context of this eternal gospel contains the announcement, “*Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great,<sup>[d]</sup> who made every nation drink from the wine of her adulterous desire.*” Another angel, a third one, followed them. He said with a loud voice, “*If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand,<sup>10</sup> he will also drink from the wine of God’s wrath, which has been poured undiluted<sup>[e]</sup> into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb.<sup>11</sup> And the smoke of their torment is going to rise forever and ever. Those who worship the beast and his image, and anyone who receives the mark of his name, are going to have no rest day and night.*”

That doesn’t sound like good news. That sounds like the Law, the consequences of sin and what we deserve. This sounds like we have every reason to be afraid of God and it even looks like the Catholic church got something right with their artwork. The artwork leading up to the Reformation started with a Shepherd carrying a wayward sheep, but slowly that Shepherd started to wear royal colors, and end up seated. It wasn’t long before the Reformation that Jesus was portrayed as the angry judge with a menacing stare. If you look at paintings in museums, you won’t see a smiling friendly face, you’ll see Jesus’ mother standing between you and him as he scowls on in judgment and can’t wait for torment. Is that what we are to make of this eternal gospel? Is this supposed to be a picture of Luther?

We certainly should fear God, honor, and worship him. Luther began explanation the first commandment with, “We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things,” the first commandment is reflected in each of the following, “We should fear and love God...” But we don’t always fear God let alone respect him as God. We may challenge his authority, mock his commands, and outright ignore his word.

We don’t always treat God as the powerful individual who created this world by the word of his mouth. We don’t always act as if God is going to judge this world. Instead of fearing God above all things we treat him more along the lines of Winnie the Pooh, the friendly, uninvolved, uncaring god who wants us to feel good about ourselves. He won’t punish anyone. He isn’t serious about his word. He isn’t involved unless we need to him resolve a problem and all good people go to heaven. Just give him a bowl of honey and his anger will be appeased.

The problem is, that’s not God. That’s a figment of our imagination. That’s the same god the atheists dream up in order push over. That’s a false god and often we have more fear for false gods, little dictators, terrorists, political parties than we do of God. Yes we are afraid of fitting in. We’re afraid of our children not fitting in. We’re afraid of failure. We’re afraid that the little church won’t last long.

The first century church and the church of the Reformation – was afraid of the same thing. “Lord Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word,” was written for Christmas as an encouragement in the face of invasion, they came to force conversion or kill. The Christians to whom the apostle John wrote we’re afraid they wouldn’t survive and in fact many of them didn’t. But that’s the good news about our lesson. There is an eternal gospel that is proclaimed. It is good news an open invitation to all to come and worship the lamb. It’s good news but that depends on which side you stand.

Good news for God’s people isn’t good news for all. We should rightly find ourselves on the side of terror. We should be afraid of God.

But then another angel, another messenger sweeps in and tells us why we have no reason to be afraid. That was a message Luther didn’t hear from the Catholic church. Luther was afraid of God. He beat and punished himself until he passed out. He was afraid of God because he didn’t know what God had done for him. That was kept hidden by the Catholic church. They had removed the Word of God, made it illegal to own a copy of the bible, burned those who tried to translate it, and even forced people to pay for something freely given. They had all but extinguished Christianity, but they could not silence God.

This God sends angels, messengers, pastors, teachers, his people to proclaim the eternal gospel – a gracious call and invitation to come and worship God. This eternal gospel is the eternal message of God – a message of both judgment and grace based on the person and work of Jesus. The purpose of proclaiming such a message is to move people to fear God and give him glory, and worship him in view of his coming judgment. God has raised up one faithful messenger after another who pointed to Jesus as their all sufficient Savior, who doesn’t have to be restrained by his mother, but comes to you clad in a manger. In humility he comes to his creation he cares for it, comforts, restores, and even puts his life on the line. The inclusion of “*springs of waters*” emphasizes God as the sustainer of all life.

This is his church that he loves. His church is all about Jesus, not our works, not our offerings, only Jesus. If we are to be saved, it must be on God’s terms, not on ours. After all, He is the Judge. But He is a merciful Judge--one who has paid our penalty Himself. His word for his church, his people, “*Have no fear little flock, have not fear little flock, for the Father has chosen to give you his kingdom have no fear little flock.*” – Luke 12:32. The gospel is eternal. It’s all about Jesus. It will be proclaimed forever.

It’s easy to see that we are afraid of the same things. But can you imagine how the world would have been changed had Luther not firmly and faithfully proclaimed the word of God in the face of death? Yes God was able to accomplish a world of change through him, and we praise God for that, he can also work a world of change through you.

That change is worked in you by the Holy Spirit working through his gospel, which tells us, “Our sins are forgiven.” You can face judgment in Christ. He tells us that Baptism is the seal and

certainty that as surely as you are baptized, you are saved. He tells us with his body and blood that all your sins are forgiven. This work is for you, on you, an in you – given to you. We believe that this is the heart of scripture. The heart and soul of faith is not about what we do but what Christ did and still does. Not you, not what we bring, only sin and death, instead it's about Christ and what he brought to the cross – himself.

That is the eternal gospel we still proclaim. That is our confession to a dying world even if we stand together as the church before the world, government, kings. We look forward to judgment because at that point there will be justice. And that is what a persecuted church needed to hear. Nobody will get away with anything. God will right every wrong done. That's his promise.

So do I really want this lesson at my funeral? I'd rather not, but then again I won't really know what you do so have at it. But make sure you don't eulogize – you don't need to make a moral argument for why I should be in heaven, besides you'd probably make my friends laugh. Don't say, "God has another angel," I'm not an angel nor will I ever be. And don't say, "We're here not to mourn the death of a great man but rather to celebrate life," Come on you know my life isn't worth celebrating but there is one who is: Jesus. And while you may mourn, you should also rejoice in the resurrection and the sure and certain hope that we will be together again: because Jesus. The Reformation: it's not about Luther. It's all about Jesus. Amen.