

“AN ETERNAL GOSPEL”

**Sermon for Pentecost 23, Reformation Sunday, October 27, 2024
St. John Lutheran Church, Massillon, Ohio**

Revelation 14:6-7: *“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. ⁷And 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.”*”

Before we pursue the message of today’s sermon text, I have to admit that Reformation services in this post-modern era are frankly disappointing and so unlike the ones I remember long ago. Hardly any Protestant and evangelical churches actually acknowledge the Reformation these days, and even many Lutheran churches only give a slight nod or lip service to it.

I can remember vibrant festival services in my home congregation in Lorain when I was a kid, and then all the Lutheran parishes in Lorain County would gather together in the late afternoon for a joint celebration at the noted Finney Chapel at Oberlin College, which could seat 1,200 people – and it was always a packed house! – and sing the strong Reformation hymns accompanied by its grand 76-rank organ, with huge adult and children’s choirs from many churches singing special chorales. (*I was privileged as a kid to sing in that children’s choir several times.*)

And then there would be a distinguished and well-known clergyman who would proclaim a strong Gospel sermon fit for the occasion, with a number of area pastors in their robes with beautiful red stoles sitting in the chancel. What a wonderful and stimulating service! What great memories!

No, today’s Reformation festivals do not compare with the ones we used to have, but the purpose and the message and the power of this observance can still strongly penetrate and stimulate the minds and hearts of us folks gathered here in this sanctuary in 2024.

How can that be?

Listen to our text: *“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.”*

Revelation is an intriguing New Testament book written by St. John the Apostle during his exile on the Isle of Patmos. He records the vision given to Him by Jesus Christ about the end of the world and the glorious eternal beyond.

A lot of imagery and symbols are described about the final plans of God to complete the saving work of Christ Jesus on behalf of us poor sinners, who now are confined to this evil and destructive world tormented by the great tempter Satan and his minions.

Over against that wicked army, God inducts His legion of angels to join the battle on earth and sound forth the divine message of peace and hope and ultimate victory. These angelic messengers bring both bad and good news to God’s people caught in the war between God and Satan.

During the Reformation era and succeeding years, many Bible interpreters believed the angel in our text was a prophecy of Martin Luther. Part of the reason for this view was that many during the Reformation years believed they were living in the end times.

Yes, they believed that Jesus was going to return very soon and take His Bride, the Church, to their eternal home. It was a severe time of plague and pestilence, ongoing war, and the threat of greater war as the Turkish army was ready to invade Europe. People were panicking and crying that the end of the world was imminent.

Of course, the world did not end. Here we are in 2024, 500 years later. At the same time, their

attitude was right. They in fact were living in the end times.

And so are we, my friends. In fact, everyone who has lived since Jesus ascended into heaven has faced the possibility of Jesus' return at any moment.

According to Jesus, we should be alert and ready every day for His Second Coming. We are fooling ourselves if we think we have plenty of time to get ready. Our time may very well run out.

Every day is an opportunity to repent. Every day gives us the moments to receive Christ's gifts. The battle cry? Stand at the ready, O soldiers of the cross!

This is so important now because there are plagues and pestilence, military wars and culture wars, and false teaching everywhere.

But if Luther was this angel, proclaiming the "*eternal gospel*," he was just one of many – from the apostles long ago to the pastors of today. It does not matter who is preaching the pure Gospel. The point is simply that the pure Gospel is preached! Preachers come and go, but the Gospel is eternal!

Or as the prophet Isaiah said: "*All flesh is grass ... The grass withers, the flower fades ...but the word of our God endures forever*" (Is. 40:6b-8).

It is not the who, but the what, and Luther would agree. That "*what*" is spoken by the angel who declares "*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.'*"

This does not sound like the Gospel, does it? Eternal Gospel and judgment do not go together – Gospel is good and judgment is bad, right? – especially in our day. And the Gospel frees us from judgment, correct?

Well, no. We confess in the Creed that Jesus is going to "*judge both the living and the dead*," and St. Peter tells us that "*judgment [will] begin [with] the household of God*."

In fact, you may be surprised to hear that the Gospel is all about judgment, but the judgment is no longer on you. The astounding truth is that your judgment has been taken by Jesus Himself!

This is the "*Eternal Gospel*" that Luther preached and wanted all the world to know. This is why you are sitting in a Lutheran Church today – because that is the message we preach.

The Gospel does not mean there is no judgment and you can do what you want. It does not mean that the judgment is on you and so you better be good and do certain things. A lot of people think this way and believe it.

No, the Gospel proclaims that there is a judgment, and what does that look like? Well, look over there at that cross hanging from the ceiling. Picture Jesus hanging on that cross. Our judgment is not you or me or anyone else. Our judgment is solely on that holy Son of God Himself.

One of Luther's favorite psalms asks, "*If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?*" Answer? No one! No one can stand before God's judgment.

The psalm continues, "*... but with You there is forgiveness, that You may be feared*." So we have hope!

Or as St. Paul said in the Epistle, "*... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" (Rom. 3). All people fall short of God's judgment.

And Paul goes on and says that all "*are justified by His grace*" – by His forgiveness – "*as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*."

Our only hope is in Christ Jesus because He was punished for our sins and suffered our judgment. God's gift of forgiveness to us cost the holy life of His only-begotten Son!

So the only right response is what we heard in Revelation – to "*worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water*." Jesus Christ died for all the earth to redeem and reclaim it!

Now this "*Eternal Gospel*" is difficult for many people to believe. And so we hear these spiritualized clichés: "*There is no such thing as a free lunch. Pull yourself up by your bootstraps. Success comes to those who strive. Do the right thing, and you will be a success. Climb the ladder to the*

top. *You have to earn it.*”

These clichés are the motto for worldly success, but not in the eyes of God. In the beginning God made man and woman perfect, without sin.

But the Garden of Eden exploded because of their sin, and all humans are now incorrigible and doomed to God’s judgment, the Holy One who expects human holiness. He cannot accept imperfection.

And sadly human sin is passed on from generation to generation – from my parents to me, and from me to my children, and my children to their children. Who can stand before God and boast of their worldly record?

This is why the angel of Revelation boldly and loudly speaks of God’s judgment – which happened when Jesus was hanging on the cross!

When Jesus was faced with that agonizing cross, He asked: *“Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour ... Now is the judgment of this world.”*

That horrid hour, in the darkness of that Good Friday afternoon, came the moment of God’s judgment against the sin of the world – not on you and me, but there, on Him, bleeding on that cross.

And so the angel proclaims this *“Eternal Gospel”* to everyone on this earth. No one is excluded.

Therefore, *“Fear God and give Him glory,”* the angel says. Fear God with reverence who judges sin and lay your sins before Him, and give Him glory by receiving His full and free forgiveness from the blood of Christ streaming straight from the cross!

This is how we give glory to God, by humbly and gratefully receiving His gifts from His eternal Gospel. Jesus did all the labor, and we are showered by His love. And our love for Him is poured out to our brothers and sisters in Christ and to our neighbors out there. This is faith in action – *sola gratia, sola fide, sola Scriptura, solus Christus!*

The truth is that the Church always is in need of reforming. The perennial religious temptation is to fall into the trap that claims we must work for our salvation rather than believing that we are justified by grace through faith in Christ alone.

In that way the glory shifts from God alone to proud and hardworking folks climbing ambitiously up the stairway to heaven. That is the lie of Satan!

This is why we need to be vigilant and listen continually to the *“Eternal Gospel”* and focus on Christ the crucified and risen Savior.

This means a life of regular repentance and receiving the forgiveness of our sins.

This means remembering our Baptism when we were cleansed for new life in Christ and graciously welcomed into God’s house of redeemed saints.

This means remembering Jesus’ invitation to His feast which feeds us His saving body and blood to be strengthened in our faith to share His Gospel with others in word and deed.

The *“Eternal Gospel”* is like a beautiful piece of music that has swept into our hearts and captivated us to God’s love in Christ that compels us to listen to it over and over again. It never is boring. It is always sweet and energizing and directs our life on earth and stirs us to receive His gifts over and over again.

It deepens our thoughts and love as we contemplate His forgiveness and peace and hope each and every day – all by His grace in Christ Jesus our Lord and our Peace.

And perhaps we may become that angel in Revelation flying into someone’s life, proclaiming this same *“Eternal Gospel”* given to us and meant for them too, pointing them to the cross of Christ and the pardon for sins that flow from it. No more sinner in God’s eyes, but a precious child of God destined for heaven forever.

This is what the Reformation was all about, and what the Church must always be about. To bring this Gospel to all people. To hear it ourselves and to live it.

This is seriously needed in our days, with military wars and culture wars, division and conflicts, godless values, changing truths, and other troubles. People need to hear the “*Eternal Gospel*” and know that God is with us all the way.

At the end of the last verse of today’s Entrance Psalm we sang:

*“By Your grace You saved the world,
In Your Word Your plan unfurled.
Those who live by faith will weather
World and heav’n with God together!” **

In the name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

– Pastor John Telloni

*** ENTRANCE PSALM FOR REFORMATION DAY**

**I will speak, Lord, of Your statutes
When the king calls forth my name.
I will stand and give my witness
And will not be put to shame.
God is refuge and firm force;
He is trial’s healing source.
He is standing at the ready
With His love and power steady.**

**We need never fear nor falter,
Even when the earth gives way
And the hills plunge into ocean
Though the mountains quake and sway.
God Almighty, close at hand,
As a sentry takes His stand.
God of Jacob is our fortress
And our blessed fount of redress.**

**Glory to the heavenly Father,
Glory to the Christ, His Son,
Glory to the Holy Spirit,
One in Three and Three-in-One!
By Your grace You saved the world,
In Your Word Your plan unfurled.
Those who live by faith will weather
World and heav’n with God together!**

(Words by John L. Telloni, based on Ps. 119:46; 46:1-3,7. Tune: “Werde Munter.”)