

IS THE REFORMATION OVER?**Sermon for Reformation Sunday, 2020****Revelation 14:6-7**

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Second Reading we just heard read, Revelation 14:6-7: **6 Then I saw another angel flying in the zenith of the sky. He had the eternal Good News to tell those who are living on the earth and every nation, tribe, language and people. 7 He was saying with a loud voice: “Fear God and give glory to Him! For the hour has come for Him to judge. Worship Him who has made the heaven, the earth, the sea and the springs of water!”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

At the time of the Reformation, people identified the **“angel flying in the zenith of the sky”** with the messenger of the Reformation, namely, Martin Luther. They saw Luther as the angel having **“the eternal Good News to tell those who are living on the earth and every nation, tribe, language and people.”** This **“eternal Good News”** included fearing God and worshipping Him. The purpose of moving people to worship God as the Creator of all life included not only the announcement of judgment (Law) but also the gracious call and invitation to such worship (the Gospel).

As early as 1522, just five years into the Reformation, 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 said, *“John wrote for us of an angel who would set forth God’s Word with complete clarity,”* referencing this angel as Luther.

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 honour,’ was Dr Martin Luther. And what is written here, ‘Fear God and give him the honour,’ 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.”*¹ So from then on, the linkage was established: The angel of Revelation 14 became associated with the person of Martin Luther, and this is how Revelation 14:6-7 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?

No doubt, Luther was in a battle. He sensed it profoundly and felt the assaults of the devil. He faced fierce opposition as both civil and religious powers lined up against him. Luther was excommunicated by the Pope and declared an outlaw by the emperor precisely because Luther was God’s “angel,” His messenger. He had restored the Gospel to its place of prominence, like an **angel flying in the zenith of the sky**, who **“had the eternal Good News to tell those who are living on the earth and every nation, tribe, language and people.”**

For Luther, that **“eternal Good News”** was too precious a thing for him to compromise or back off. He would rather be criticised as obstinate than to yield in the pure proclamation of the Good News. What had given him the courage to confess the faith so boldly? The Good News itself. Luther knew how much the **“eternal Good News”** meant to him, freeing his conscience from the burden that had long weighed him down. Luther therefore placed his confidence in God as his mighty fortress, no matter the threats of Pope or emperor.

“Eternal Good News” to proclaim - that was the key. To keep that Good News pure and undefiled, so that it could be preached for the salvation of every nation - that was the driving force behind the Lutheran insistence on pure doctrine and the sound practice that flowed 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 **the eternal Good News** to proclaim to every nation.

However, Luther did not see himself as the reformer. Christ is the Reformer of His Church. Luther was merely a teacher, given to teaching very unpopular truths, and teach them he did. The teachings of the Lutheran Church which are the sweetest to us are the ones that drew the heaviest fire in Luther’s time - and still draws the antipathy of the world, both religious and secular, today.

¹ https://web.archive.org/web/20141110070454/http://beck.library.emory.edu/luther/luther_site/luther_text.html

One of the topics that Luther spoke and wrote about on several occasions was the idea that the Gospel would not long endure in one place. He likened it to a shower of rain which would be here for a time, and then move on to somewhere else. The cause of this change, according to Luther, was the hostility of the world in the place where the Word is taught - the hostility of the world *within* the church, not merely outside of it. Let me read you a couple of quotes of Luther on this topic.

This first quote is Luther writing about John 7, verses 34-35, where Jesus says He will not be among the Jews much longer. Luther writes:

“These words are terrible enough; but the wickedness, the impiety, and the ingratitude of these knaves are even worse. They must be told: “I shall be with you a little longer, etc.” Christ says, as it were: “You need not be in such a hurry to kill and destroy Me. As it is, I shall be with you just a little while longer.” We have a similar message for the Pope: “It is unnecessary for you to fuss and fume so against the doctrine of the Gospel. Even without your ranting the Gospel will tarry in your midst but a short time, especially after we who are now proclaiming it have closed our eyes in death. It will not remain after our departure.” The Gospel has its day and takes its course from one city to another. Today it is here; tomorrow, there. It is like a heavy shower which passes from place to place, soaking and enriching the soil. Christ says (Matt. 10:23): “If they drive you from one city, go to another. When all the cities have been visited, then I shall come with the Day of Judgment.” Even if a certain place accepts the Gospel today, it will not stay there long. People hate it; they view it with envy; they curse it; yes, they starve it out. Therefore Christ declares: “I will not remain with you long. You need not persecute and condemn the Gospel so. I shall soon quit the field and make room for you. As it is, a darkness will soon descend upon you, leaving you in utter ignorance.”²

There, Luther was warning the Pope. In another place, Luther is encouraging his people - Lutherans - to be diligent in holding fast to the Gospel. He wrote:

“Let us remember our former misery, and the darkness in which we dwelt. Germany, I am sure, has never before heard so much of God’s Word as it is hearing today; certainly we read nothing of it in history. If we let it just slip by without thanks and honour, I fear we shall suffer a still more dreadful darkness and plague. O my beloved Germans, buy while the market is at your door; gather in the harvest while there is sunshine and fair weather; make use of God’s grace and word while it is there! For you should know that God’s word and grace is like a passing shower of rain which does not return where it has once been. It has been with the Jews, but when it’s gone it’s gone, and now they have nothing. Paul brought it to the Greeks; but again when it’s gone it’s gone, and now they have the Turk. Rome and the Latins also had it; but when it’s gone it’s gone, and now they have the Pope. And you Germans need not think that you will have it forever, for ingratitude and contempt will not make it stay. Therefore, seize it and hold it fast, whoever can; for lazy hands are bound to have a lean year.”³

We see this ingratitude and contempt that Luther wrote about even today. We would expect nothing else from the Roman Church who never delighted in the Gospel. The Protestants, too, were never on board with Luther in His prizing of the Gospel, preferring decisions and holiness of conduct to trusting God and believing that we have forgiveness as His free and unmerited gift.⁴ What is troubling is how Lutheran Churches - so-called, and once quite Lutheran in fact - are walking away from the Gospel. Even so-called conservative Lutheran Churches are not reliably Lutheran any more. The situation leads us to ask, “Is the Reformation Over?”

The answer is that for many, *it is*. They have rejected “**the eternal Good News**” in favour of something that *feels* good. We all have that temptation. Even when we delight in the old hymns and find comfort in the familiar shape of the liturgy, our flesh is seeking its comfort in how things feel - warm and familiar - rather than finding our comfort and hope in Jesus and the salvation which He has accomplished for us and gives to us. It is good when the truth is familiar and comfortable and comforting - but we must guard against letting the beauty of the service or the nostalgic hymns, and what-not, be comforting simply *because* they are familiar and nostalgic. Of course, we want the truth to be familiar and comfortable, and it is good that it is such an old friend that brings joy just to hear it, but it is the faith and

² Luther, Martin. Vol. 23, Luther’s Works, Vol. 23: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 6-8. Edited by Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann. Luther’s Works. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999, c1959, p. 260.

³ Luther, Martin. Vol. 45, Luther’s Works, Vol. 45 : The Christian in Society II. Edited by Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann. Luther’s Works. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999, c1962, p. 352.

⁴ Ephesians 2:8-9

the doctrine that should bring the joy, not merely the sense that we have been here before.

Many others in our society have given up the truth in favour of other teachings. Perhaps they have been deceived, and maybe they have been distracted by something new. Some have put away the uncomfortable truths of the law and about sin in order to be more appealing to the unbelieving world around us. The modern emphasis on outreach and “missions” often covers a flight from the difficult things about our sins and our sinfulness. There are those that want to pretend that people are basically decent and good by nature. It is an alluring thought, and the world around us likes that form of doctrine. *It just doesn't happen to be true.*

But if you throw away the doctrine of sin, and stop telling people about their need for salvation, they won't understand the Good News, and they will invent something much more to their liking for their religion - like all those religions who re-affirms the individual and tells you that *you* are wholesome and capable. If *you* just focus all that positive energy, you can achieve great things! This heresy is as old as the Serpent in Eden. In addition, the old errors of works righteousness are always around, and many people find scoring high on their own goodness standard is easier to trust in than the gift of God in connection with Christ Jesus. Trusting God has not been a human strength since the time of Adam and Eve.

For those who have turned away from the truth, or who have chosen to reach for the delightful spiritual experience, instead of church and faith, or for those have opted out to take full advantage of all that the world has to offer, the Reformation is probably over. We are being invited to join that happy throng all the time. The invitation is present in the temptation to think we know better than the Bible. It is found in the desire to take back that hour or two a week that seems so hard to devote to worship and fellowship. It is what we are wrestling with when we feel like we can stop learning and stop doing devotions and focus a little bit more on everyday life. We are being tempted to join the world when it doesn't seem so bad to miss church, and we have a “right” to do those things that keep us away from the fellowship of the people of God around Word and Sacrament. If we give in to such temptations, the Reformation is over.

It is over for most people in our country. Christians today feel somehow authorised to be arrogant, independent, competent in themselves, and safe. Bumper sticker witnessing takes the place of actually speaking about one's faith to another, and our faith becomes something just between God and me. By the way, when your faith becomes something between just you and God, you have abandoned and denied the Church, the body of Christ. When one's religion makes one feel a step ahead and a stroke better than someone else, then you have moved beyond the Reformation. The truth is that we Christians are never done with the Reformation if we are true to the faith of our fathers.

We need to be continuously reminded that we are worthless and evil people. Our holiness is not something *we* do, it is something that we have been given, and if we lose sight of that truth, it will slide off our backs and reveal again that we are just like the worst of those around us in society - you know, those that we point to and screw up our noses at. We are sinners even as Christians. Our holiness and our salvation is by ***grace alone***. We need to continually be reminding ourselves of that wonderful truth.

No, it is not wonderful that we are wretched and miserable sinners. It is just true - but it is wonderful that Jesus has died for us, and pours out His righteousness on us and makes us holy and gives us eternal life, and guarantees that we shall rise from our graves and live forever - no matter what happens to us before then. We cannot lose sight of what we are by nature - and so pride and arrogance are out of the question. We dare not lose sight of what Christ has done in us and to us, for that is the Gospel - and so despair and self-loathing are not appropriate for us either. We can have a quiet joy and a sense that those awful people around us need some of what God has given to us - salvation. We don't pity those people, we simply recognise the need, and sorrow over their lost condition, and try to do what we can to help them. And all that we can do is tell them **the eternal Good News**, namely, that in Christ we have the Good News of forgiveness, life, and salvation, and pray that they will also believe and receive and become just like us in Christ. We can also invite them to church. ***Christ alone*** is our righteousness and hope - and He is all they have to hope in, too.

We need to continue the Reformation, daily in our own lives, and in our church, and in the world around us. We need to live out what it is that we believe so that there is a hope that they - whoever “they” are - may see something of Christ in us, and ask us the questions so that we can *“be ready to make a defence to everyone who asks... to give an account for the hope”* that we have, just as Peter said (1 Peter 3:15). We need to do what we can - not to earn

anything, because we cannot, but to spread the faith - because it is *faith alone* that receives the forgiveness Christ has won on the cross for us. And it is faith alone that finds comfort and hope and joy in the Good News - and in the fellowship of those that believe.

I suspect that the “little shower” of the Good News among us may be moving. It doesn’t seem long for Australia. Too many of those who have heard it have become bored with it. Too many who knew it once have abandoned it. We tend to get bored with the familiar - even when the familiar is good. When it is God’s stuff, our nature simply rebels. We need to pray every day that God would continue to maintain the blessings of the Good News and His church among us. We need to plead with Him to keep the Reformation alive in our hearts and in our homes and in our church. Wherever God’s people are, there the Reformation is alive and on-going. We must be in the Word - for it is *Scripture alone* that works in us and strengthens us and teaches us. It was in the Word that Luther found the Reformation, and it is only when we are in the Word that it will continue among us.

Is the Reformation over? For some, yes. For some, it never started. For me - and I also think for you - the answer is, ‘No’. Or at least we hope and pray that it is not - and that it will never be over. We are in a battle. Shall we give in? Shall we give up? No, we shall continue to confess Christ, for we have “**eternal Good News**” to proclaim. Truth does not change. The message does not change, and people do not change, either. All people need what only the Good News delivers, namely, the forgiveness of sins for Christ’s sake, eternal life, and the sure hope of salvation. The Lutheran church, above all, should set forth this Good News with great courage and great clarity, like that “**angel flying in the zenith of the sky.**”

So take courage today. God has not abandoned His little flock.⁵ Jesus has died for us and for all people. That shows how much God is committed to us and His church and to the proclamation of the Good News. Christ has risen victorious in the fight, and right now our Lord is ruling all things for the good of His church. The clear light of the Good News is shining brightly, even in these grey and latter days. Take heart: We have “**the eternal Good News**” which gives us hope and courage, and we have this Good News to proclaim. May God grant it for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

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

PRAYER FOR THE FESTIVAL OF THE REFORMATION

Lord God almighty, we praise You for calling us by the Gospel into the glorious company of the saints, into the Church of Jesus Christ. We praise You for Your kindness to us, and for Your continual care of Your Church. Continue to protect Your people from the attacks of Satan and from all enemies of Your Word and will.

We praise You especially that, when the Church was weakened by the false words and misguided wisdom of men, You freed and revived it by Your grace and goodness. When people had tampered with the Gospel that we are justified through faith in Christ, without doing what Your Law requires, You once again restored the Gospel. Through Your Holy Spirit You raised up people of courage, and faith, who led Your people back to the living truth of Your Word, and restored to them the joy of salvation in Jesus Christ. Grant that we may continue in Christ by continuing in His Word, which makes us free.

Protect Your Church today from every false way. Liberate us from all false teachings that reject or corrupt the Gospel of free grace in Christ. Rid the Church of all half-heartedness, love of this world, fear of ridicule, and persecution of the truth. Renew and strengthen it for Your gracious purposes. Preserve each one of us in faith in Your Son, through which we are justified in Your sight. Grant that we may continually trust in Your loving kindness, receive the peace of Your free pardon, and live by the Spirit in faith, hope, and love. Send out workers into Your harvest to preach Your pure, unchanging Gospel to all nations, and richly bless Your Word.

Look kindly on the nations of the world, and especially on our own. Give those who govern us love of the truth, warmth of heart, and purity of mind, that they may serve our country faithfully on Your behalf. Let Your light shine in countryside and city, that people everywhere may come to know You and turn to You in repentance and faith.

God of all comfort, we commend to Your loving care our homes and families, and all people in every situation and circumstance. Be the refuge and strength of all, always ready to help in times of trouble.

Bless us daily with Your Spirit so that we may always trust in Your grace alone to save us, through Jesus Christ

Your Son. Finally receive us into Your eternal presence, where we shall serve and praise You for ever and ever. Amen.

REFORMATION DAY

Revelation 14:6-7

⁶ Then I saw another angel flying in the zenith of the sky. He had the eternal Good News to tell those who are living on the earth and every nation, tribe, language and people. ⁷ He was saying with a loud voice: "Fear God and give glory to Him! For the hour has come for Him to judge. Worship Him who has made the heaven, the earth, the sea and the springs of water!"

Romans 3:19-28

¹⁹ We know that, whatever the Law says, it says to those who are under the Law, that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰ Therefore, no human being will be justified in His sight by doing what the Law says. For through the Law comes the recognition of sin.

²¹ Now, however, the righteousness of God apart from the Law has been made known, and the Law and the Prophets testify to it. ²² It is the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ, to all who believe. For there is no difference. ²³ For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. ²⁴ They are justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God has publicly displayed Him as the propitiatory-cover through faith in His blood, to show His righteousness, because He had let go unpunished

the sins that had been committed in the past, ²⁶ in His patience. God has done this to show His righteousness at the present time, that He may be righteous and the One who declares righteous the person who believes in Jesus.

²⁷ Therefore, where is boasting? It has been excluded. Through what principle? Through the principle of works? No, rather, it is excluded through the principle of faith. ²⁸ For we conclude that a person is justified by faith, apart from the works of the Law.

John 8:31-36

³¹ Therefore, Jesus said to those Jews who had become believers in Him, "If you remain in My Word, you are truly My disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

³³ They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been in slavery to anyone. How do You mean, 'You will be made free'?"

³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I tell you that everyone who keeps on committing sin is a slave of sin. ³⁵ The slave does not remain in the family for ever. The son remains for ever. ³⁶ Therefore, if the Son makes you free, you will certainly be free."

⁵ Luke 12:32