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The Festival of the Reformation

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Eternal Gospel”

Text: Revelation 14:6-7; Romans 3:19-28; Matthew 11:12-19; Psalm 46

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

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.

At the time of the Reformation, and since, there have been those who believed this angel was a prophecy of Martin Luther. Part of the reason they did so at the time of the Reformation was because they believed they were living in the end times; that Jesus was going to return imminently and take home His Bride, the Church. Because there was plague and pestilence, there was war, and the threat of greater war as the Turkish army was on the doorstep of Europe. Things didn't look good. It seemed like the end was upon them.

Now, it turns out, the world didn't end - here we are some 500 years later. But their attitude was right. They were living in the end times. As are we. As is everyone who has lived since Jesus ascended into heaven and could return at any time. According to Jesus, we are to live our lives always ready for His return. We shouldn't think we have plenty of time - you might not. Don't put off repenting. Don't put off receiving the gifts of the Lord. Always be ready.

Especially since in our time, too, there is plague and pestilence, wars and culture wars, and a lot of false teaching out there.

But if Luther was this end times angel, proclaiming the eternal gospel, he was just one of many. From the apostles who preached this eternal gospel at Pentecost to the pastors of today. Which is important, because that is to confess **that the who really isn't as important as the what**. The person not as important as the message. Which Luther would have wholeheartedly agreed with. For who was he? Just a monk. Just a university professor. Just an unworthy sinner. He would die, and did die. Preachers come and go. But the gospel is eternal.

Or as the prophet Isaiah put it: *All people are like grass . . . Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, - that is, the people come and go - but the word of our God endures forever* (Isaiah 40:6b-8).

So it's not the *who*, but the *what*, that Luther would really want us to consider today. And the *what* is what the next verse in Revelation goes on to say: ***And he [this angel] said with a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, - why? - because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."***

Which doesn't really sound like the gospel, does it? For **eternal gospel** and **judgment** and not two things a lot of people put together! For gospel is good and judgment is bad, right? Especially in our "Don't judge me" world today. And the gospel . . . well, that frees us from judgment, doesn't it? Well, *no*, actually. We confess in the Creed that Jesus is going to *judge both the living and the dead*. And Peter tells us that *judgment [will] begin [with] the household of God* (1 Peter 4:17). In fact, it may surprise you to hear that **the gospel is all about judgment**. But judgment that is no longer on you - **your judgment that has been taken by Jesus**.

That's the eternal gospel Luther preached and wanted all the world to know. That's why you're sitting in a Lutheran Church today - because here that message is preached. That the gospel *doesn't* mean there is no judgment, so go do whatever you want. That's not right, though a lot of people live that way today. And it's *not* that your judgment is on you, so you better be good and do certain things. That's not it either, though many people believe that, too. The gospel is that there *is* a judgment, **and it looks like that** [*point to Jesus on the cross*]! **Your judgment on another**. And not just any other. On God Himself.

For as the psalmist said, in one of Luther's favorite psalms: *If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand* (Psalm 130:3)? No one, is the answer. No one can stand before God's judgment. *But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared* (v. 4). So we have hope. Or as Paul put it today (as we heard in the Epistle), **for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**. All fall short of God's judgment. *But*, Paul goes on, all are also **justified by his grace** - by His forgiveness - **as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus**. So we have hope, because of the one who took our judgment. A very costly gift, therefore, this forgiveness. Costing the life of God's own Son.

So as we heard in Revelation: **worship him** - who did this! - **who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water**. *And* who loved His creation so much that He died for it.

Perhaps that's what makes the gospel so hard to believe for many. This incredible love of God for people like us. Who sin against God. Who sin against one another. Who sin by how we treat one another and how we treat God. Who sin by our sordid and wicked thoughts and desires. Who sin with words that stab and pierce, or with silence that fails to help and heal. Who confess our sin one moment and then go fall into the same sin again.

Who sin because that's what comes naturally to us - not because God made us that way, He didn't. He made us perfect and without sin. But we are infected with sin from the moment of our conception. Sin passed down from parent to child, from generation to generation, from Adam down to us today. And *If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, - that is, count and tally up our sins - O Lord, who could stand? Not me.*

Which is why the angel of Revelation speaks *with a loud voice!* To cut through all the other voices and noise we hear in our world today, that we might hear this: **that the hour of God's judgment came when Jesus hung on the cross.** That's what Jesus Himself said. When some Greeks come and want to see Him, He says: *the hour has come* (John 12:23). When faced with the cross, He asks: *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* (John 12:27, 31). When He's in the Garden praying, He says: *Father, the hour has come* (John 17:1). The hour, the time, the moment, of God's judgment against the sin of the world had come - not on you, but there, on Him. And so the angel proclaims this eternal gospel *to [all] who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people.* For it is for every nation and tribe and language and people. None excluded.

So fear God and give him glory, the angel says. Fear the God who judges sin and confess your sins - all of them, great and small. And then give Him glory by receiving the forgiveness He won for you and provided for you on the cross. For that is how we glorify God, *by receiving His gifts.* By showing Him to be, as Paul said today, both **just and the justifier** - the forgiver - **of the one who has faith in Jesus.** Faith that says: *yes I am a sinner, and a bigger one than I will ever know. And there is my sin, on Jesus! He bore it, so I wouldn't have to. He took my guilt so that I could have His innocence.* To speak and live that way proclaims to the world the glorious love of God.

And to not speak and live that way is, therefore, to do violence to the kingdom of heaven. The violence we heard of today in Matthew's Gospel. Violence to this message of forgiveness and grace that says: *No! There is something I do. There is something I must do. There is something I must be.* These are the people, the generation, as Jesus says, for whom God just doesn't do it right. ***We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.*** That is: *God, you're not being God right!* His Word is wrong, His actions are wrong, His judgments are wrong, His ways are wrong, what He says is right is wrong, and what He says is wrong is right. And no to forgiveness for all. For *some*, maybe. Those who do and say and believe what we think, what we want. According to the world and its moment in time.

At the time of the Reformation, there were those who fell into that trap and did violence to the kingdom of heaven and its message of forgiveness, ***that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.*** But not only then. So it was in the time of the apostles, and today, too. The Church always needs reforming, it is said. To hear always the eternal

gospel. To focus on Christ and Him crucified. To repent and believe. To remember that we are **baptized**, when this incredible love of God came to us through water and the Word. To hear time and time again the incredible words of **Absolution**, the full and free forgiveness of our sins, and to hear the angel's message of our Saviour who made it so; whose blood is powerful enough to wash away to the sin of the world. And then to drink that **blood** and eat the **body** that did so on the cross, to feed and strengthen you in this life and faith.

For sin is a sweet melody that makes you think it good and something that you want. But once you do it, its sweetness turns bitter and its song becomes a condemning shout that crushes all.

But the gospel is that melody whose sweetness increases with time, like a well-aged wine. That the more we know our sins and shortcomings and failures, the more we know our condemnation, the more precious it becomes to hear: I forgive you all your sins. You are My child. Take and eat. And you glorify God when you receive these gifts and say: **Amen!** *Gift received.*

And then those words of Revelation . . . ? Maybe you, then, become that angel, flying into someone's life, proclaiming the eternal gospel that has been given to you but is for them as well. Pointing them to their judgment on the cross, and speaking of that forgiveness that is a gift from Him, the crucified, to you, the sinner. That you be sinner no more, but child of God in His eyes.

*For Thy Strong Word that cleaved the darkness
and created the heavens and the earth and all things,
Is the same Strong Word that bespeaks us righteous,
And the same Strong Word that hung on the cross
and conquered in His resurrection from the dead,
And the Strong Word that now gives us lips to sing His glory,
throats that shout the hope that fills us,
and mouths that speak His holy name (LSB #578).*

That's what the Reformation was all about, and what the Church must always be all about. To bring this good news to all people. To hear it ourselves. Especially in these gray and latter days, when there is plague and pestilence, wars and culture wars, false teaching and changing truth, and all manner of troubles and fears. We need to hear and know, now as much as ever, of the truth, of forgiveness and life, of hope and a future. We need to hear and know, now as much as ever this eternal gospel, that ***the Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress***. That ***A Mighty Fortress IS Our God*** (LSB #656). A fortress of love and forgiveness.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.