

The Festival of the Reformation (transferred)
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✧ Jesu juva ✧

SEIZING THE ANGEL'S MESSAGE

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Revelation 14:6-7; Matthew 11:12-1

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Then I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting Gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth – to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people...” The church is both the result of that heavenly proclamation and the body that continues to promulgate it throughout the world. Everything the Church is and does, from the work of her pastors to the activities of the men, women and children that are part of her, is centered in the Gospel, in that glorious proclamation that Christ Jesus has suffered and died on account of our sins, and has been raised for our justification, so that God can say: “I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” The Lutheran Confessions say that wherever that Gospel is rightly proclaimed, through preaching and the giving of the Sacrament, and where people are gathered to that Gospel, there is the Church.

And yet there are other voices from within the Church that often seem to drown out the angel's proclamation, and attempt to replace it with something else. Such was the case in the time of the Apostles, when Jewish Christians on the one hand, and Gentile philosopher Christians on the other, attempted to replace the Gospel of Christ with something else, either with an Old Testament piety rooted in keeping God's Law, or with a supposedly loftier knowledge that could lead one to unification with God on your own with Christ merely serving as a sort of guide. Such was the case during the time of the Early Church where heresies about the person and natures of Christ sprung up all around, seeking to undermine the Gospel by undermining faith in who Jesus really was. And such was the case in the Middle Ages leading up to the Reformation, where the Gospel was thought to be just one part of the salvation equation, a part that required the addition of the believer's own efforts of will and of good works to attain justification before God.

Today we commemorate the Reformation because through it the din of that false Gospel was quieted so that the angel's voice could be heard clearly once again in the Church. When Luther nailed his 95 Theses to door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg it was just the beginning. Those hammer blows were the sound of the Gospel starting to knock on the door of the Church once again. The Gospel had been obscured for so long. It was still there, though clouded and overshadowed by the Church's false teachings. It could still be found, though it was not being proclaimed rightly. But now, at last, it could be heard again. And the sound of it grew through the faithfulness of Luther's preaching and writing, through the bold confession of faithful lay people, through the preaching of pastors, through the hymns and chorales that were sung in churches and schools and homes, the Gospel was heard with all of its power and clarity and joy once again. Luther's struggle was always concerning the Gospel. Everything the Lutheran Church fought for in the Reformation had the Gospel at its center.

In the Church there must be more than just a commemoration of these historic events, there must also be a continuation of them in our own time. There must always be an on-going reformation for the sake of the Gospel. Yes, the reformation, or at least what it was about, must go on in every generation. The angel St. John saw in his apocalyptic vision proclaims an “everlasting Gospel”. And so that Gospel must be proclaimed by the Church and in the Church today. More than that, it must be at the center of all of the Church’s thoughts, efforts, and activities. In short, the Gospel must define every aspect of the Church’s life.

But now, as in ages past, there are other voices, other proclamations, that threaten to muffle or drown out the Gospel. The challenges to the Gospel have not and do not go away. Rome, to this day, teaches the same basic thing that it taught before the Reformation, that one must cooperate with the Gospel and add your good works to Christ’s in order to be justified before God. The protestant and non-denominational churches all around us clamor against the Gospel when they root salvation in the will of the believer and his or her decision to follow Jesus and to lead the Christian life. Liberal Christianity shouts another gospel altogether, one not of eternal salvation, but of worldly causes and social justice. And many of the churches of our synod and most of the synod’s leadership have now replaced the Gospel with “missions” and the methods to achieve mission goals as the center of their theology and proclamation.

You see, the struggle to be faithful today is really no different than in Luther’s day. The battle today is still over the place of the Gospel in the Church. So is the Gospel just one of many things in the Church’s life, or is it at the center of everything the Church is about and does? St. Paul said to the Church of his day: “I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” Paul knew that the Gospel had to be at the center of everything. It was not one thing among many. It was the only thing. And if there was something that was not in accord with it, not rooted in it, then it was not to be a part of the Church or her life. And as soon as you put something other than the Gospel at the center of the Church’s life, you will have become one of the other voices, the voices which compete against the voice of that heavenly angel and against the Gospel he proclaims.

But the Gospel will never be silenced. It can’t be. It is an everlasting Gospel. That angel is still flying and still proclaiming. This is the Church’s life, her joy and her hope. And when the Gospel is kept at the center of the Church’s theology and activity, everything else will fall into place out of concern for that Gospel proclamation – liturgy & music, church structure, missions, social action, what have you. They will all come out right. For that which is in complete accord with the Gospel, which has the Gospel at its very core and is suffused with it throughout, is well-pleasing to God. And so the Church must continue to look after itself to make sure that this is the case, that the Gospel is not only a part of what she believes and does, but is at the heart of everything she confesses and practices.

But this is not just a challenge for the Church, it is also a personal challenge for each one of you. Will you hold this Gospel faithfully? Will you allow it to stand at the center of your faith and life? Every force out there outside of the true Church wants you to doubt Christ’s love and forgiveness of you. The heretics tell you that you have not done enough or have not been committed firmly enough, or have not loved Christ enough to be saved. Funny isn’t it, because that’s exactly the message the devil brings to you, accusing you in your conscience in order, not to bring you to repentance, but into to despair. But that’s not his only tactic. He’s happy not to do that, if he can get you

to be religious in a different way, in any way that causes you to put your trust in something other than Christ, or even along side of Christ. Because he knows that if he can get you to do that, can convince you of something other than the Gospel itself, that you will be easy prey for him.

It even seems at times that the Scriptures themselves are set against the Gospel. There are two messages there, after all. There's not only the grace of Christ's love and forgiveness. There's also the Law of God with all of its demands on you. So in which should you put your hope? Should you trust in the keeping of the Law in order to become pleasing to God? Or should you look to Christ and His grace? The answer is actually crystal clear in the Scriptures if we will listen to them. It is as the Lord said today through Jeremiah: "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah – not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke..." It is not the Old Covenant of works and of Law that brings salvation. And it was never intended to do that. It is the New Covenant of grace through Christ that has always been the means by which God grants salvation. The Law serves the Gospel, the Old serves the New, in that the Law brings us to see our need for the Gospel. It shows us our sins in order that we may turn away from them and seek God's grace. The Old Covenant was never an end in itself. It was meant to point us to Christ. And so the Gospel, not the Law, is God's final Word to you.

So what must you do in your personal Reformation? How can you regain the centrality of the Gospel in your life? Just listen. Listen to that angelic proclamation and believe what God says to you through it. And once Christ has laid hold of you by His Gospel, you must also seize it. Having received it by grace, lay hold of it forcefully, as Christ says in today's Gospel lesson. Now what does that mean? It means let nothing wrest this Gospel from your grip. Let no other voice draw you away from it. For this is your life, your salvation, your eternity. Hold it tight and say to all challengers: "I am justified for Christ's sake and no other. I have nothing to add, nor could I. And I don't need to. God has forgiven my iniquity and my sins He remembers no more." Amen.

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

✠ Soli Deo gloria ✠