

October 30, 2022 (Reformation Day) – Revelation 14:6-7 & Romans 3:19-28

Our First Reading for today is odd. There's no other way to describe it. Two verses plucked from the middle of the Book of Revelation. No context. No explanation.

And two rather odd verses, at that. An angel bearing the eternal Gospel. Flying over the earth proclaiming it to everyone. Telling everyone to fear God and give Him glory because the hour of judgment has come. What exactly does this have to do with Reformation Day?

The reason is actually rather interesting. At least, it is to me. You see, many of the first Lutherans were convinced that Martin Luther was the fulfillment of this prophecy. That he was, in fact, this very angel. Sent by God to proclaim the eternal gospel to a Church that had lost it. That had been held captive by the papacy and the false doctrine of Rome. And based on this reading of the Book of Revelation, they speculated that, once his mission was complete, the world was literally going to end.

Clearly, they were wrong, at least about that last part. But, in another sense, Luther could be very much be seen as a fulfillment of this prophecy, in his own way. He may not have been an angel of heaven, but the word angel just means messenger. And Luther was very much a messenger of the Gospel. And because of him, the Gospel was indeed proclaimed to just about every nation and tribe and language and people.

Although, even then, it really wasn't because of the 95 Theses that this happened, the publication of which occurred on October 31, 1517, and the reason why we celebrate Reformation Day on this particular Sunday. If you've ever read the 95 Theses, you'll find that there isn't much Gospel in them at all. There is, however, a lot of Law.

Law about the doctrine of indulgences. Law about the doctrine of purgatory. Law about those who abuse the Church and corrupt it. Law about the role of the Pope. It is not a Gospel oriented document. And really, it would come to have little to do with the Reformation, other than mark a point at which Luther made public some of his first concerns about the Church and its doctrines.

The real theological work of the reformation occurred two years prior. When Luther published his commentary on the Book of Romans. We don't know the exact date that it occurred. We don't even know the exact date that the commentary was published. But at some point while writing it, Luther realized that the Church had lost the Gospel. There really wasn't much "good news" left in the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century. There was a lot of Law. Lots and lots and lots of Law.

There was Law that said if you sinned you had to go to confession. And if the priest said that wasn't enough, then you had to do penance. And if that wasn't enough, then you had to make an offering. And if that wasn't enough, then you had to make a pilgrimage. Visit Rome or the Holy Land or pray before a relic.

There was always something more that you had to do. Or else God would punish you. Punish you with misfortune and suffering. Punish you with centuries upon centuries in purgatory. God would punish you because God is righteous and just and he cannot tolerate sin and he cannot tolerate sinners. And if you want his grace you have to prove that you are worthy of it.

But that isn't Gospel. It's Law. And it cannot save us. And Paul makes that clear in this passage from Romans. Because what he tells us first is that the Law doesn't exist to free us from our sin. It exists to make us feel the guilt of it. *"For by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God's] sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."*

There's an ancient Greek myth about a man named Sisyphus. Sisyphus committed a terrible crime and was punished by the gods by being sent to Hades. In Hades he was brought to a hill and at the base of the hill was an immense boulder.

And he was told if he could roll the boulder to the top of the hill, he would be freed. Except that as he rolled the boulder up, it grew heavier and heavier. Until finally there was no way that he could possibly hold it any more and it would fall backwards, tumbling back to the bottom of the hill. Where he would have to start all over again. Rolling this boulder up a hill for all eternity.

That's what the Law is. It's a boulder that gets heavier the more we rely upon it. The more we think we can earn God's grace and forgiveness, the more likely it is that the Law will come crashing down on us. And leave us in complete despair that we'll ever be free from it.

That's what happens when you rely on the Law. And if the righteousness of God were only found in the Law, like what the Roman Catholic Church taught in Luther's day, then we could never be free from it. But that's not what Paul tells us.

He tells us that *"the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law."* That the righteousness of God can be found *"through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe."* You see, what the Catholic church missed is that God can be righteous and punish us. But God can also be righteous and forgive us.

That's exactly why Christ came to earth, shed his blood, and died for us. To be God incarnate. To be completely righteous. And yet, to be compassionate and merciful. And to show humanity that God is more than the Righteous Judge. Sending plagues and destruction and exile upon his people when they disobey.

He is also the Righteous Shepherd. Who rescues his sheep. Who runs after them when they stray. He is also the Righteous King. Who protects His people with a "mighty fortress" when they are in danger.

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." All are *"justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."* And this was not done to show that God doesn't care about Law or doesn't care about our sin. It was done *"to show God's righteousness."* To show that he could withhold judgement. Pass over former sins. And still continue to be as righteous as He always was and always will be.

He is both *"just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."* He is the one who says, "This is what you must do or else you're a sinner worthy of my wrath. Worthy of death and hell." And he is also the one who says, "But this is what my Son has done on your behalf. He has justified you in my eyes. So that you are no longer guilty of anything at all."

And when God has done it all, we have nothing left to claim as our own. His grace is a gift. Apart from works of the Law, so that no one can boast.

We saw that grace at work in Jaxson and Jagger this morning. For it wasn't them coming to the font that justified them in God's eyes. It was God coming to the font that assured them that they were indeed justified. Without God's Word, without God's promise, without Christ's blood shed on the cross, that was merely water splashed on their heads. But with God's Word, with God's promise, with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that water was the gift of God's grace, washing away all their sins.

The Reformation didn't occur because Luther listed off 95 reasons why he didn't like the leadership and practices of the Roman Catholic Church in 1517. Honestly, you could probably ask the current pope to do that, and he would list the same 95 Theses as Luther did. Because sin is sin. Corruption is corruption. Law is Law. And, even today, the Roman Catholic Church is still very good at teaching Law.

No, Luther was an angel, a messenger, bearing the eternal Gospel because he believed and proclaimed that no amount of works or money or penance could save us from death and the grave. Nothing in this life can free us from God's wrath. The hour of judgement has come, and we stand before a God whom we can only fear and give glory. Because there's nothing we can do to earn his love.

And yet we stand here with hope. Hope in the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Hope in God's promises to his baptized children. Hope that God has proclaimed good news to all those who dwell on the earth. From the most righteous monk to the filthiest sinner. Hope that, through His Son, God has set us free. Free to be, like Luther, angels of good news in our day as well. Amen.