Second Sermon for Reformation Sunday 2015

Revelation 14:6-7 + Matthew 11:12-15

This morning in Las Cruces we focused on the Gospel for Reformation Sunday. This afternoon we turn to the Epistle from Revelation chapter 14. This Epistle for Reformation Sunday was chosen for a reason. It was chosen because the early Lutherans of the 16th and 17th centuries saw God’s Word being fulfilled before their eyes. They read the words of John’s prophecy about that angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach, and they saw a special fulfillment of those words in the preaching of Martin Luther. Why?

Luther was no angel, not in the literal sense. He was just a man who lived 500 years ago. But that man, like all pastors and priests of God’s Church, was called and ordained to the office of the Holy Ministry. And in the figurative, symbolic language of Revelation, pastors and teachers of the Church are referred to as “angels,” God’s chosen messengers. For example, Jesus instructed John to write seven letters to the seven “angels,” or pastors, of the seven churches. So this angel in Revelation 14 appears to be a symbol of a notable teacher in the Christian Church.

And the timing—the timing of this angel’s appearance is important. In the chapter before, Revelation 13, John had described the coming of the two beasts—the beast from the sea and the beast from the earth, a secular Antichrist and an ecclesiastical Antichrist (an Antichrist within the Christian Church). The secular Antichrist appears to be a reference to the Roman Empire that persecuted and killed Christians. Rome’s opposition to Christians was open and public.

The ecclesiastical Antichrist comes in secret. He pretends to be Christ, but his words come from the dragon, the devil. He sits as lord of the Christian Church on earth, and also has political power. He insists on being worshiped as God, and he puts his own word above the Word of God. And he has his throne in Rome.

Now, what was going on at the time of Luther? The pope in Rome was selling indulgences, so that people could purchase the forgiveness of sins with money. He claimed to be the Vicar of Christ on earth—the lord and master of all Christians. He set up human traditions in the Church and taught Christians to earn God’s favor by following those traditions. He insisted that Christians pray to the saints and look to them for help. He taught that Jesus didn’t pay for all sins with His holy precious blood, but that sinners have to work off some of their own sins, both here on earth and in the purgatory that he invented. And he took the Mass, where God gives us the body and blood of His Son for the forgiveness of our sins, and turned it into a good work that we have to perform in order to earn the forgiveness of sins.

Martin Luther helped to unmask the Roman Antichrist. He saw how the Roman Pope fits the Biblical description of the Antichrist, how the pope had tried to silence the voice of the Gospel that proclaims faith alone in Christ as the only way for sinners to be justified before God. So Luther studied the Scriptures. He found the Gospel there, the Gospel that proclaims salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, for the sake of Christ alone. And he spoke up and he spoke out loudly, like an angel flying in the midst of heaven, publicly and boldly proclaiming the everlasting Gospel.

And Luther’s simple Gospel proclamation, his restoration of the truth of Holy Scripture, has now gone out to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people, so that men are without excuse. The Antichrist, the Roman Pope, held people captive for long enough with his false doctrine. Now the truth of Christ and His Gospel is plain to all, and yet so many still cling to Antichrist and his lies.

Fear God and give glory to Him, Luther proclaimed, for the hour of His judgment has come. Don’t fear the pope. Don’t fear councils and Cardinals. Fear God! And don’t give glory to man or to the Virgin Mary or to sleeping saints. Give glory to God, whose grace alone moved Him to send His Son into the world, to suffer and die and to pay the penalty for all our sins. Give glory to God, who raised His Son back to life for our justification. Give glory to God, who sends His Holy Spirit to turn us from unbelief to faith, and who justifies us by faith alone in Christ.

Whether or not God had Luther specifically in mind with that “angel flying in the midst of heaven,” the everlasting Gospel has reached your ears, and Martin Luther was certainly one instrument, one angel of God among many who caused that to happen. Rejoice in the Gospel today and give thanks to God that He has opened your eyes to see through the lies of the Roman Antichrist, so that you have a firm foundation for your faith, now and on the Day of Judgment: Scripture alone, which points to Christ Jesus alone, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for all your sins, and who, by His Spirit, has brought you out of the darkness of unbelief into the glorious light of Christ. Amen.

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