

Good News Carried on Angels' Wings

SERMON TEXT: Rev. 14:6-7

Dearly beloved of God, our sermon text for this morning is taken from our first reading wherein we heard of an angel who had the eternal Gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue and people. Let us pray...

Almighty God, Heavenly Father, You have given to Your world Your good news of grace towards us through the giving of Your Son, Christ Jesus, our Saviour, and You have gathered us from the four winds to be one people, Your Church, sealed by Your Spirit. We therefore look heavenward to Your Word of promise as our sure help in this world as we wend our way in hope toward the world to come. Prepare, O Lord, my tongue to proclaim Your eternal Gospel. Prepare our hearts and minds to rightly receive the message which informs our faith and reforms our lives. To You alone be all glory! Amen.

Dearly beloved in the Lord, when parents choose to name their children there are many factors to consider. The name given may be of significance because it harkens back to a family's lineage, thus honouring those who've come before us. It may reflect our hopes as it's meaning conveys certain attributes that we pray will be bestowed upon our children— whether for our sake, their sake, or the sake of all others. It may reflect our hope for their future. It may reflect a quality we perceive they already possess. It may reflect a great deal, indeed. Now, while much can be said on the matter, I bring this up because in choosing to name our firstborn, our daughter, Angel, we were cognizant of just how much a name can matter. You know her as "Angel". Her friends know her as "Angel". Yet, what is it that is meant by that name? When

she was an infant, many would look into her basinet and comment, saying, “She’s a little angel,” or “She has an angelic smile.” When well behaved or when she’d demonstrate care and concern toward others, many would comment, saying, “She’s an angel.” Yet, the word “angel” has nothing to do with such characteristics as cuteness or congeniality. No, it’s origin is Greek and it simply means “messenger”. An “angel” is a messenger. Now, for clarification, our daughter’s full name is actually “Evangelica”— we just shorten it to “Angel” for the sake of simplicity. We placed the “Ev”, the ‘e’ and ‘v’, in front of the name “Angelica” for a number of reasons: partly to honour my father as it is customary in Greek culture (his name was “Evangelos”), but, more importantly, to alter the meaning from that of a “messenger”, one who can bring any kind of news, to that of “a messenger bringing good news” or, more specifically, “a messenger bearing the Gospel”. After all, we as Christians, and more specifically as Lutherans, know God’s good news, His everlasting Gospel, to be the very crux of our identity. Hence, our desire for our daughter was and is that this good news would both bear her and be borne by her throughout all her days. Again, as Christians, God’s good news is at the heart of who we have become by His grace alone, through faith in His great promise.

Our beloved Rev. Dr. Martin Luther, the Great Reformer, understood this well— that is, that our identity is derived from our relationship to God’s Christ. So too did those who rallied around his call for reformation in the Church, almost five hundred years ago. On account of this emphasis on the Gospel, these early Lutherans were the first to be called “Evangelicals” (which, of course, is derived from the Greek word, εὐαγγέλιον, meaning “good news”). It was later, through the mouths of detractors, that the name of Luther was appended to God’s people, to Christ’s Church. Luther himself was offended by this, saying, “I ask that my

name be left silent and people not call themselves Lutheran, but rather Christians. Who is Luther? The doctrine is not mine. I have been crucified for no one... How should I, a poor stinking bag of worms, become so that the children of Christ are named with my unholy name? It should not be dear friends. Let us extinguish all factious names and let us be denominated from Christ, from whom alone we have our doctrine.” Our doctrine, our teaching, what we confess, is nothing less than the eternal Gospel spoken of in today’s text. In our reading from the Book of Revelation, St. John the Apostle beheld a series of visions that pertained to his time, times to come, and to the very end of all time as we know it: the consummation of the world for the world to come, the new heavens and new earth. St. John spoke of an angel. Since the time of the Reformation almost five centuries ago, many have come to see Luther as the angel in our text, the very fulfillment of St. John’s prophetic vision. In fact, this very text was used for Luther’s funeral. Yes, Luther was indeed an “angel” insofar as he was a messenger sent from God, bearing the eternal Gospel which was once delivered to the saints. Luther did not look to bring forth a new message to bear upon the Church, but to restore the eternal Gospel to its rightful place at its centre. Regarding the Reformation, he rightly said the following:

This message is not a novel invention of ours but the very ancient, approved teaching of the apostles brought to light again. Neither have we invented a new Baptism, Sacrament of the Altar, Lord's Prayer, and Creed; nor do we desire to know or to have anything new in Christendom. We only contend for, and hold to, the ancient: that which Christ and the apostles have left behind them and have given to us. But this we did do. Since we found all of this obscured by the pope with human doctrine, aye, decked out in dust and spider webs and all sorts of vermin, and flung and trodden into the mud besides, we have by God's grace brought it out again, have cleansed it of this mess, wiped off the dust, brushed it, and brought it to the light of day. Accordingly, it shines again in purity, and everybody may see what Gospel,

Baptism, Sacrament of the Altar, keys, prayer, and everything that Christ has given us really is and how it should be used for our salvation.

As an “angel”, a messenger from God, the message was not Luther’s own, but that which we, as God’s people, are to make known to all— to every nation, tribe, and tongue. Hence, by bringing God’s good news, His Gospel, before all the world, we come to be rightly called “Evangelical”.

Now, it should be stated that the word “angel”, as it is often used in God’s Word, does indeed also denote what we generally come to associate with its use, namely: spiritual beings sent to speak on behalf of God to His people or to carry out His judgments. In effect, we can think of them as having one wing pointed to the heavens to draw our gaze toward God and the other wing dipped in blood as agents of divine justice. Therein, when it comes to such angels, we often encounter messages of both Law and Gospel. However, here, in our text, we hear only of Gospel. We are told of the angel that soars above the earth as he calls out to its inhabitants. Now, while Luther surely deserves to be thought of in such terms, as a heaven sent messenger (albeit not in the way that most might apply the term “angel”), it should be noted that the angel of St. John’s vision has been both present, and represented by many, throughout the Church’s earthly sojourn. This angel was most assuredly present during the Reformation; however, his presence is no less among us today as he continues to watch over God’s people with the clarion call concerning Christ’s cross. This angel still soars overhead as we bow our heads before our God, giving Him all glory in worship. This angel comes to us, Christ’s Church, in those times when God’s message is threatened by those outside the Church and, regrettably, among those found bearing the name of Christ.

In the context of our text, we find that St. John sees, in a vision recorded in the chapter preceding our passage, the very nature of the enemies that seek to destroy the Church. These enemies are described as “beasts”. There are two of them in his vision: one comes forth from the sea and the other from out of the earth. The first is described as follows: “And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads.” This monster is sent forth from Satan who is described in the same verse as the Dragon that “stood on the shore of the sea.” The beast in this vision represents the secular authorities which rightly bear the sword, but wrongly use it in accord with Satan’s bidding. God warns us that at times one of the Church’s fiercest enemies will be the State, the rulers of this world who wrongly wield their God-given authority against God’s people. History has borne witness to this truth as wave after wave of persecution has plagued the Church in the past and continues to trouble the Church today. The Christians in St. John’s day suffered at the hands of the Romans and the Jewish leadership. The Christians in Luther’s day suffered at the hands of the Emperor and his Roman Catholic princes. Today, Christians are marginalized here and are beheaded abroad by the states that oppose God’s message. Nevertheless, the angel spoken of in St. John’s vision still calls out, “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and the springs of water.” This angel, soaring beyond the reach of such enemies from the sea, in effect, screams out, “Fear only the true source of power in all creation: the Lord, your God, the Judge who will judge the world!”

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther did not crumble when he was confronted, but nobly stood firm in the face of the emperor’s noblemen, having been dragged before dukes and princes to

defend the eternal Gospel. Given the choice between fearing men or fearing God, Luther would not recant concerning God's Word. It held him fast. It held him firm. There he stood. He could do nothing other than "Fear God and give Him glory." God helped Him stand against this beast. The very same God will help us to stand as well. We do not stand alone. Though we are not called to change either society or the state by use of power, we, as those whose identity is defined by God's message of good news, are nevertheless called to speak—to proclaim that powerful truth which sets all men free from the shackles of sin and death, the eternal Gospel of God's Christ. We do not tremble before this "beast".

As to the second "beast" in St. John's vision, this monstrosity is described as follows: "Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon... It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people." In Luther's day, this beast represented the powers in the Church which colluded with the State. They tried to appear as servants of God, but their teachings were directly against the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They blended Law and Gospel, and thereby turned the Gospel into a monstrosity akin to the creatures described in St. John's visions. They confused grace and merit. They mixed faith with works, and thereby diminished the work of the One in whom our faith rests. They confused the people. They worked against the eternal Gospel. Indeed, we must always be aware and be wary of just such a "beast" arising at any and all times. Yet, thanks be to God, the very gates of hell cannot prevail against the truth of God's Word, that Word which gathers us as God's people.

The angel in St. John's vision watches and wages war against all such "beasts" through the power of God's good news. It presents the Gospel's forgiveness in answer to the Law's

condemnation. Good news in light of the bad news. Free forgiveness through Christ as opposed to a conditional mercy coming by the way of our works. It presents us with a Saviour far greater than our sins. It presents us with God's promise to save sinners. It transcends the limitations of time and tongue as it calls out people from every nation and tribe to come to God's Christ, He who alone can save. It excludes only those who exclude themselves through unbelief. Jesus died for the sins of the world. This truth sets men free: we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. To God alone be all glory! The Bible alone brings us this authoritative Word from God to ward and warn us against any and all competing claims. By it alone, Luther resisted the word of the Devil who sought to extinguish the light of God's good news to our darkened souls. The Devil would have us trust in our works as paving our way to God. He would have us ignore our wretched sinfulness and the accusations of our conscience so as to fool ourselves into believing we are good or, at least, good enough to stand before a holy God. Luther resisted Satan by turning to God's Word as the final word on all matters of faith. He used his mouth and pen to proclaim the truth contained therein and this holy work of preaching the Gospel and translating the Bible into the language of the people has continued to this day. It continues as God's people, the children of the Reformation, rightly continue and stay the course. Here we too must stand.

Dearly beloved in Christ Jesus, the beasts described in the Book of Revelation continue to abide with us to this very day. They seek to silence us altogether or to slur our speech as we speak about what God has done to set us free from His righteous judgment. The enemies of the eternal Gospel desire to deny or obscure the work of Christ and His personhood. They wish to hide from the world just who Jesus really is and what He has done for us all. So, for your own

sake and for the sake of all others, stand firm in His Word. Abide in His promises. Let His Word alone inform your faith so as to reform your life, conforming it in His own cruciform image. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther, the man God used to bring the Gospel back into focus, was, indeed, an “angel”, a messenger carrying God’s message. When we named our daughter “Evangelica” it was with this in mind: that she too would be a faithful witness to the everlasting Gospel. We desire that to also be true for our son. We wish that for each other. We desire that to be the case for all who name the name of Christ Jesus. As “Evangelicals”, like Luther, we too, dear brothers and sisters, bear God’s message before the world as we hold fast to it, irrespective of the wishes of its enemies. Beloved in the Lord, the angel of St. John’s vision still soars above us. He contends with God’s enemies *through us* as we tell others of the hope we have in Jesus and as we open our Bibles to bring God’s good news to them. Having been served by the Gospel, being set free from sin, let us then serve as “angels” to those in our midst through the proclamation of the eternal Gospel, that which was reclaimed in the Reformation: Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Here we stand. We cannot do otherwise. So help us God. Amen.

Now, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN.