

30 October 2016
The Festival of the Reformation

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“The Eternal Gospel of an Eternal Saviour”
Text: Revelation 14:6-7; John 8:31-36

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.

Think about those words that St. John proclaimed to you this morning from the book of Revelation. For they are what the Reformation is all about. For this day is not about Luther, though it includes him; and it is not about the events that happened some 500 years ago, though we remember them. Today is about the ***Gospel*** that is ***eternal***. It is about this Gospel that has been proclaimed through the ages, from the very first person to the very last person. The Gospel that is for ***every nation and tribe and language and people***. The Gospel that is happening here and now, for you. For this Gospel is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the forgiveness of sins that we have in Him. And so ***it*** is eternal for ***He*** is eternal. ***It*** is eternal for ***His love*** is eternal.

Think about that. And that in this Gospel, as we just sang in the chief hymn, you stand in a very long line of hearers, of patriarchs, prophets, saints, fathers, and martyrs.

For to Adam and Eve this Gospel was proclaimed, to give them hope even as they were exiled from Paradise. To Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob this Gospel was proclaimed, to set their eyes on their true home even as they wandered this earth with no home. To Moses and Israel this Gospel was proclaimed, that they might see that their great deliverance from slavery in Egypt was just the beginning. To Joshua this Gospel was proclaimed that he fear not the powers and kingdoms of this earth, no matter how enormous and fearsome they looked and seemed. To David and Solomon this Gospel was proclaimed, that they would see that their great and glorious kingdoms were just a pale foreshadowing of the great and glorious kingdom that is to come. To God’s people in exile this Gospel was proclaimed through the prophets, that they might know that though they seemed forgotten they were ***not***, and that God’s loving discipline lasts only a time.

And then, after all that proclamation . . . then this Gospel, this good news, ***came to earth***. All God’s promises were fulfilled as this Word was made flesh, and in Jesus, the hopes of all God’s people were fulfilled. For in Jesus, the Son of God had come to set us free. And

- as St. John also told us today, in His Gospel - *if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.*

Free from the condemnation your sin deserves, for Jesus took that condemnation on the cross in your place. Free from the slavery of having to build your own kingdom and future, for Jesus has provided one for you. And better than you could ever build yourself. Free to love and serve others, for you don't have to serve yourself. Jesus has promised to provide all that you need. And does. Free from the fear and grip of death and hell, for Jesus passed through death and the grave and broke it open. It could not hold Him and it will not hold you. Free from the oppression of satan and his world of lies, for Jesus has told you the truth. Free from having to be something or someone here and now in this world and life. For in Jesus, *you already are*. The least in the kingdom of God is greater than the greatest here. And what else burdens you, is oppressing you, is worrying you, is robbing you of life, that Jesus cannot provide?

No, you are free! Free to live, free to love. For Jesus is the Son of God who has come to make us free sons of God.

That's what we celebrate today. The fact that now risen and ascended, Jesus' freeing work has not ceased, but continues. His *eternal Gospel* continues to be proclaimed, and through it He is calling His people and building His Church. For though this Gospel has been and is still proclaimed by **many**, the Church is built only by **One**: by Christ Himself. Or as one Lutheran theologian, following in the footsteps of Luther, put it:

It is not we who build. Christ builds the church. No man builds the church but Christ alone. Whoever is minded to build the church is surely well on the way to destroying it; for he will build a temple to idols without wishing or knowing it. We must confess - he builds. We must proclaim - he builds. We must pray to him - that he may build (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Treasury of Daily Prayer*, p. 840-1).

And that's exactly what happened. The Church was built by Christ in the apostles, who proclaimed this Gospel before governors and kings and were not ashamed. The Church was built by Christ through martyrs, who proclaimed this Gospel with their blood; that He who held the power of life and death was not the one bringing down the sword, releasing the lions, or kindling the fire beneath their feet. The Church was built by Christ in early church fathers, who proclaimed this Gospel though exiled and persecuted. The Church was built by Christ in the dark ages, when the light of the Gospel could not be snuffed out. The Church was built by Christ in the Reformation, when an insignificant monk who had some questions proclaimed a Gospel he so desperately needed himself. The Church was built by Christ in the midst of wars, under the oppression of communism, in the midst of secular humanism, through the skepticism of modernism, and in all the changes and challenges we are witnessing today.

*And now the Church is built by Christ **also in you.** And this last is not the least, but may, in fact, be the greatest.*

For this eternal Gospel has come **to you** in your fears, your doubts, your sins; in your questions, your wanderings, your despair; in your rebellion, your persecutions, and in your little kingdoms that you think are so great, and has rescued you and set you free.

But not only in times of trouble and distress, the eternal Gospel has come to you also in the times of your prosperity - when lack of troubles make us fat and lazy, when ease makes us presume on the favor of God, when good *times* make us think *we're* good, and we turn not to God but to ourselves for what we need. And perhaps it is in our prosperity that the work of God is all the more amazing. Which is why we pray in the great litany: "*in all time of our tribulation, [and] in all time of our prosperity . . . help us, good Lord*" (LSB p. 288).

And He does. For His Gospel is eternal. And the Lord "***who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ***" (Philippians 1:6). He is not like us. He does not start and then not finish. He does not start and then leave us on our own. He is the beginning and the ending, the Alpha and the Omega (Revelation 22:13). He is faithful.

And so His work begun in you in your **baptism**, making you a son of God in Christ, continues. He is a faithful Father who raises His children in perfect love - not sugary love, and not overbearing love, but perfect love.

And though your mind be filled with many words and many wisdoms of this world, seeking to lead you astray; though your life be filled with riches seeking to capture your heart and love, or filled with troubles seeking to rob you of your hope, the work of Christ continues in you with His **Word** of life, to lead you in His way of truth. The way of repentance and reliance on Him.

And though satan wants to kill you and constantly holds the guillotine of your sin and guilt over you, the work of Christ continues in you by continually raising you to life in **Absolution**: proclaiming the truth that your sins are not held against you - they were held against Christ on the cross. And if they are on Him then they are not on you, *and so you are forgiven*.

And though your sinful flesh wants to gorge you with the things of this world that do not satisfy, the work of Christ continues in you to fill you with what does truly satisfy the longings and desires of your heart as He fills you with Himself, feeding you with His own **Body and Blood**, given and shed for you.

Apart from all this, apart from Him and His work, we would lose, and lose big. Both the pleasures and persecutions of this world would quickly destroy us. But as this eternal

Gospel has lasted through so many generations, so many challenges, so many temptations, so many assaults, so many persecutions, so it will last in you. **Not because of you; because of Him.** The One who is faithful, the One who is true, the One who is your Lord *and Saviour*.

And so you need not wonder: is this for me? *Yes, it is for you.* For it is ***for every nation and tribe and language and people.*** It is for all who are stuck in sin and death and cannot set themselves free. For the Son has come and set you free. And ***if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.*** And not just now, but forever.

For though the day of judgment is coming, for you it has, in fact, already come. Your Saviour has spoken His “not guilty” upon you, already here and now. What then remains for you now is forgiveness and life. Life in Him. Which is true life. The life of the Gospel. An eternal Gospel which gives eternal life.

Now, it may not always look like the Gospel is winning, or that it’s even working at all. A world gone mad in sin. A church shrinking in size and wilting in courage. Persecution increasing and tolerance decreasing. Love of sin and hatred of truth. Confusion. Wrong proclaimed as right and right as wrong. And more . . . That’s okay. We do not know the plan of God, how He is building, and how He is pulling down so that He may build, as He did in days of old. But that He is working and building, have no doubt. On this you have His Word, and the witness of generations past. And most of all, you have the witness of the cross - the place above all places where it looked like satan had won; but which was, in fact, the place of his defeat and God’s victory. For there, death did not win - life won.

So come now and receive again that life. Come in confidence in our Mighty Fortress. Receive Him who has done - *and continues to do* - such great things for you. Come and join the “*angels and archangels and all the company of heaven*” - all those who have gone before us - at the feast of our Lord. Come and feast on Him who loved you **then**, who loves you **now**, and who will love you **forever**.

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.