

Martin Luther died in the city of Eisleben on February 18th, 1546, and on February 22nd, he was laid to rest at the Castle Church in Wittenberg. The funeral sermon was given by Luther’s pastor, Johannes Bugenhagen, who said, “What shall I say and how shall I speak, since I probably will not be able to utter a word because of my tears?” And then he preached for about forty minutes. Given that Luther would often preach for hours at a time, the people were probably amazed at his brevity.

Bugenhagen’s main Scripture passage for his sermon was our Revelation text today. “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.” The Greek word ἄγγελος (angelos) means messenger. Bugenhagen boldly applied this text to Luther, because Luther was a messenger of that eternal Gospel. But at Luther’s death, there was a great deal of worry. What will we do now? Luther was the one who held everyone together. Luther was the one everyone went to for answers. Luther was the one who made all this happen, or so it was thought. How can we possibly go on without him?

Now you might wonder what they could have been worried about back then. Things all worked out in the end. But it wasn’t quite that simple. After Luther’s death, co-reformer Phillip Melancthon began to take more of an ‘agree-to-disagree’ approach to unity than Luther did. The man who had written the great confession of Augsburg and written its defense was much less eager to fight for the truth. Maybe that’s because the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V had troops on their way to Wittenberg, Smalcald, and Saxony to crush the Lutheran princes and their provinces. And everyone seemed to have a different idea of what it actually meant to be Lutheran. Death and confusion reigned. From their perspective, it looked as though the Gospel itself were in danger. And at any moment, it could be lost.

We aren’t fighting precisely the same battles in 2020, but the stakes feel the same. Out there, our world is rejecting our faith. People don’t respect the Bible or the Church like they used to say they did. Sin is just out in the open and promoted by our connected culture. We face uncomfortable situations because of our faith. Christians who hold simple statements of Holy Scripture to be true are painted as whacked-out fundamentalists and branded as dangerous. And it seems worse than we’ve ever seen before.

So what do we do? When the world does exactly what Jesus said it would do to us, where do we turn? Might I suggest a return to basics? We belong to the Church who proclaimed, “Faith alone, grace alone, scripture alone, because of Christ alone.” Do our actions demonstrate that we believe these ‘alones’? That’s the beauty of Bugenhagen choosing Revelation 14:6-7 as Luther’s funeral text. When they were all wondering how in the world Christ’s Church could survive, the answer was already there. When we wonder how in the world we’re going to get by, the answer is already here. It’s the Gospel; the eternal Gospel.

Simply put, the gospel is news; it is the announcement that Christ has already overcome the world. Jesus has already died as our sacrifice for sin. Our death has been swallowed up by His resurrection. These results have been given to you freely, without any worthiness or striving of your own. And after that, there is nothing more that you need to do in order to be made right with God. It's all done. It is finished.

And that Gospel, that 'news,' that announcement of a changed reality, is forever. It always has been. This is the Gospel that gave hope to Adam and Eve. This is the gospel at the heart of all the prophets warnings and promises. This is the disciples' Gospel. This is the Early Church's Gospel. This is the medieval Church's Gospel. It's the Gospel of the Lutherans who mourned Luther's death. And this the Gospel that sustains today's Church, and always will, wherever it is proclaimed. It's a simple message. Your sin problem is far worse than you may think. And you are far more loved by God than you can imagine. Jesus paid the penalty of your sin problem for you, on the cross, so that you can be reconciled to God. Nothing can rob you of this sacrificial love. It's yours because God wants to give it, and does give it, again and again, as the news is proclaimed.

No matter what happens, out there or in here, God provides for the announcement of this news. Whether a building is around or not doesn't change it. Whether a government official approves or disapproves doesn't change it. Whether public opinion is pro-or-anti-Christian doesn't change it. Because this is Jesus' Church and Jesus' Mission. If someone thinks they can silence the voice of God's own Son, I've got news for you. It hasn't worked for 2,000 years, and it won't work today. Jesus has never stopped sending His messengers to proclaim that eternal Gospel to every nation and tribe and language and people.

This Eternal Gospel delivers exactly what it says. Proclaiming this news with clarity is what Reformation Day is all about. Therefore, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water." For in His judgment, Christ was judged in your place. And you are declared "not guilty." You are declared "loved by God."