

## **Written Copy: Revelation 14:1-3 “Standing Steadfast with the Lamb”**

Reformation Day Celebrated

Sunday, October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2023

### **Text: Revelation 14:1-3**

<sup>1</sup> Then I looked, and there was the Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and the name of his Father written on their foreheads. <sup>2</sup> And I heard a sound from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of a loud thunderclap. The sound that I heard was also like the sound of harpists playing their harps. <sup>3</sup> They were singing a new song in front of the throne and the four living creatures and the elders. No one was able to learn that song except the 144,000, who had been purchased from the earth.

### **The text’s intent**

Encourage the Church to gather around Word and Sacrament where Christ is truly present and keeps us in the steadfast faith of the true Gospel Message. He encourages us to share it despite the persecution from the devil and his humans means of evil human institutions and false religion by which he tries to destroy the Church and lead believers astray into condemnation. In the end these means of the devil will be destroyed, and all who align themselves with them and their false message about God and salvation will suffer eternally. But those who die in faith, even at the hands of these evil human institutions, are blessed to receive the eternal peace and rest that He gives in the New Heavens and New Earth.

### **Focus Statement:**

Jesus comes and is truly present in Word and Sacrament to uphold us in the steadfast faith of the one true Gospel where salvation is by grace, alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, found in Scripture alone. All that hold fast are protected by the Spirit in that faith now and will rest from the battle being waged against them in the peace of eternal life.

### **Function Statement:**

#### **Why it’s important to know:**

The devil is at work in our day as he was in John’s Day and in Luther’s to destroy the Church and lead believers astray with a false Gospel that is Christ plus anything else.

#### **What the hearer should do as a result:**

Remain vigilant in their involvement in the means of grace. Watch out for any message that says we are saved or made right with God by anything we do. Know that we are not saved for a heaven on earth, but eternal life in the New Heavens and New Earth.

### **Subject Sentence: Christ truly present to keep us in faith to eternal life**

## Introduction

If you've been a Lutheran for a while you have probably heard many Reformation Sermons. I'm wondering how many of them used this passage from Revelation as the sermon text: **Revelation 14:6-7** <sup>6</sup> **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.** <sup>7</sup> **And he said with a loud voice, "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."** It is the appointed First Lesson for Reformation Sunday. Maybe you might have heard one or two, but I'm guessing a more accurate number might be none at all for most of you.

Did you ever wonder why it is that this is the selected lesson? What does an angel flying overhead with an eternal Gospel to proclaim, yet speaking heavy words of law, have to do with Luther and his work to reform the Church? I've read that some Lutheran Reformers of the past interpreted these verses as being prophetic about Luther and his work to bring the true Gospel back to the Church. And in part that works. Luther is an example of what John was describing here. But we also believe and confess that it is dangerous to interpret Revelation according to any one time period in exclusion of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD when it was written. It is also dangerous to take several verses out of context and build a sermon around them.

So, I have chosen for our celebration of Reformation 2023 to include the context of these two verses as our First Lesson from Revelation 14:1-13. And for a sermon text I've chosen not our two perennial verses, but what I hold to be the context that helps us understand them better. **Revelation 14:1-3** <sup>1</sup> **Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.** <sup>2</sup> **And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps,** <sup>3</sup> **and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth.**

Now because it's Revelation, this passage may not initially seem to provide much clarity. We have a Lamb, 144,00 (which seems like something out of the Jehovah Witnesses "Watchtower Magazine"), harpists playing, four living creatures, and elders, among other things. What do these have to do with Luther, or us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century for that matter.

I want to try to shed some light on this. However, I don't want to make this a Bible Study on Revelation. That would take more time than we have today. So, while I may not answer all the questions raised by our First Lesson today, I will attempt, with the help of God, to shed light on what this passage meant for John's 1<sup>st</sup> Century Church, for Luther's 16<sup>th</sup> Century Church, as well as for us 20 Centuries after it was first written.

## **Cautions Regarding Understanding Revelation**

Before we get started, we should go over the ground rules and cautions involved in reading and understanding Revelation. It is not written in the same style as either the Epistles that Paul wrote which contain clear theological teaching about God, Christ, and faith, or the Gospels which are more historical narratives with theological teaching interspersed. The style of writing that makes up Revelation is called “Apocalyptic”. It is different from most other passages in Scripture in that it is highly symbolic. If you try to read it literally like we read the Gospels, then you are going to be extremely messed up in your understanding. You would have literal dragons flying around, a sacrificial lamb sitting on the throne, weird living creatures, and the world ending three or four times. Instead, all these things are word pictures that John is using to describe visions he was shown of things that are beyond the ability of words to describe and communicate. He is trying to convey spiritual truths and realities that have no corresponding basis in our lives today. He is also writing in code, because a lot of what he is writing about would reflect negatively on the powers of the day, which is Rome.

That takes us to consider who his original audience is, who he was writing this book to. It was originally a letter sent to 7 churches in Asia Minor that he was acting as a Bishop over. These Churches were suffering intense persecution at the hands of Emperor Domitian, who demanded all people, including Christians worship him as a god, or suffer the severe consequences up to and including death. The Lord Jesus Christ called John to write this letter to let them know He was aware of their suffering, with them in the midst of it, and to encourage them not to give up. The message is that despite all the evil surrounding you, Christ is winning, and His is the victory at the end. And as believers who stand steadfast with Him, we too win too, now, and on the Last Day.

The Lord gave John this message through a series of visions that are highly symbolic in nature. Many of those symbols are like a code that the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Church would’ve understood. For instance, when John writes about Babylon, that is code for Rome. Why do that? Well, if a Roman official stopped a courier carrying this letter to one of the Churches it was addressed to in Asia Minor, they would probably destroy it, and kill the courier, since what it had to say was prophetic of Rome’s destruction.

The other reason for using symbols is that it meant something not only in John’s Day, but throughout all the ages of the Church up until now. For instance, numbers should not be read literally. While this was addressed to 7 literal churches, it was not only for them. In Apocalyptic writing 7 stands for God’s perfect work on earth, as can be seen with the 7-day Creation. The 7 Churches stand for all of the congregations our Lord would plant and water from John’s Day, until the day of Jesus return, including us here today. These symbols are largely drawn from the Old Testament, which was an important component of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Bible, more so than with us today.

And as we interpret and apply these symbolic visions, we must keep in mind they had to mean something to the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD Church, as well as the Church throughout all the ages. If that first angel was only speaking about Luther, that would've meant nothing to previous 15 Centuries worth of believers. I plan on giving you the Biblically based interpretation of these symbols as the Church throughout the ages has historically understood them; but not where they all are drawn from and why they mean that. We would be wading far too deeply in the weeds than we have time to go this morning.

## **Symbolic Picture of The Lamb on Mount Zion**

We begin with the vision that John is shown of the Lamb standing on Mount Zion with 144,000. The Lamb symbolizes the resurrected and ascended Christ Jesus, who as we confess in the Creeds, stands at the right-hand of the Father, ruling over all. Mount Zion originally referred to the location of the temple in Jerusalem. However, that temple was destroyed in AD 70, and has never been rebuilt. John is writing 20 years after that. So, Mount Zion is a word picture describing the Church, the assembly of true believers here on earth, gathered around Word and Sacrament, where Jesus promises to be really and truly present.

The 144,000 is another word picture first presented back in Chapter 7. It's not the best of the best Jehovah Witnesses. It is not a literal number. It represents the 12 Tribes of Israel (God's Old Testament Church), multiplied by the 12 Apostles (representing God's New Testament Church). Multiply that by 1,000 which means "really, all of" something, and you have the symbolic number representing all the believers in Christ alive on earth at any given moment. In Chapter 7 of Revelation, we understand that these are all those who have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptismal faith. Here they are at worship, singing a hymn that only they can learn. The reason only they can learn it is because it is the hymn of faith and confession of the Triune God. Non-believers might learn the words, but they cannot sing it as a confession of faith, because they don't have any.

## **Christ' Messengers Protecting the Church from Satan's Attacks**

The Church is to be doing this even as the devil is busy trying to stop them. In the previous chapter John is given a symbolic vision of how the devil tries to do that throughout the ages. He cannot personally harm the Church, Christ who rules over all won't allow it. Instead, the devil uses what Revelation describes "The First Beast". This symbolizes human institutions and governments that are supposed to be God's gift to provide for our temporal needs. The devil infiltrates them and uses them to attack the Church and our faith. And in support of them he uses false religion, especially that which calls itself Christian, but does not proclaim the saving Gospel, or any Religion that calls for people to worship anything or anyone other than Jesus Himself.

In John's Day this was Rome. Emperor Domitian demanded all people worship him as a god. And those that refused, and instead worshiped Christ alone were persecuted and killed. John was that messenger for the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Church to hold fast in faith in Christ alone.

In Luther's day it was the Roman Church and the Pope who turned people away from true faith in Christ. It encouraged praying to saints, when Jesus taught prayer should be done only to the God, since prayer is worship, and is to be done in His name. Christ is our Mediator, who has opened the way for us to come into the Father's presence in prayer anytime and anywhere. Praying to the saints or Mary makes her and them to be gods in place of Jesus. Luther was that messenger from God to the Church to give glory and worship to Christ alone.

The Roman Church also taught that forgiveness only came when one confessed the sin to the priest and then did the appropriate act of contrition: some work that earned your forgiveness in the sight of God. And since no man could ever confess all his sins or do enough acts of contrition to make himself right with God, Rome taught that when people died, they had to spend time in Purgatory. Purgatory was a place between heaven and hell that was kind of like spending time in jail where you stayed until you finished atoning for your sins and could then proceed on to heaven.

But the Roman Church offered a way out, and that was called indulgences. The idea was you paid money to support the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, and in return you received a slip of paper from the Pope, an Indulgence. This official document signed by him stated that you were forgiven part of, or perhaps most of your time in Purgatory, depending on how much you paid. And people gladly jumped at the chance, giving money that was needed to buy food and support the family. You could even buy your deceased loved one out of Purgatory for the right donation. Purgatory is not in the Bible. And this is not the Gospel. It is a lie from the mouth of Satan used by him to lead the Church in Luther's day astray.

**Romans 3:23-24 <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus**

Luther taught from Romans that Jesus is the atoning sacrifice that removes God's wrath over all of our sins. He paid the price in His blood to redeem you and bring you back into the Father's family where you stand forgiven and restored, not by your works, but by Christ's alone. There is no amount of money that we could ever pay to erase the debt we owe God. But in Christ we stand forgiven by faith in Him alone. Christ alone opens the door to eternal life to come; no earthly Pope and no slip of paper can do that. And as those who are saved we do good works because of the wonderful salvation we have as the free gift from Christ that comes through the Gospel by the Spirit. Luther was God's messenger to restore this true Gospel Message to the Church.

This is the Gospel Message that still needs to be proclaimed and held fast to in our day because the devil is still hard at work to lead us astray. He is at work through Churches that teach you can be forgiven if you make a “decision” for Christ, instead of the Biblical truth that Christ chooses us in Baptism and His Spirit calls us to faith. We have preachers like Joel Olsten who would tell you “Stop looking at your weakness (in other words stop confessing your sins) and start declaring the power of I am. Say I am strong, I am healthy, I am blessed, I am beautiful, I am prosperous.” It’s a very popular message especially in our do-it-yourself culture today. But it’s not the truth. Paul’s answer to that is Jesus words to him when he prayed about the thorn in his flesh: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness. Most gladly therefore, I will boast about my weakness, so that the power of Christ may dwell within me.” And what is that power of Christ that dwells within? The one true Gospel that we are made right with God and declared to be His precious and beloved children through our faith in Jesus Christ alone.

## **Conclusion**

You here today stand as one of those 144,000. You stand and worship here with the Lamb of Sacrifice who stands really and truly in our midst through the Word and Sacrament. We hold fast to the true confession of who our Triune God is through our confession of the Creed, through our liturgy, our hymns, and through the message proclaimed. The devil is hard at work around us to move us away from faith in Christ alone and to trust in ourselves and anyone or anything else. But the Holy Spirit is stronger than the devil, and He is hard at work in you every time you worship and study His word, both here in this place and throughout your daily lives. Because His Spirit lives in you, you are always standing steadfast with Christ in that faith no matter where you go. And the message of Revelation applies to the Church of all ages, especially today: Christ wins. In Christ you win the spiritual battle now, and together we will celebrate His victory in the New Heaven and New earth forever and ever. Amen.