

2014

Reformation Day • Revelation 14:6–7 • October 26, 2014

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Recommended Citation

Hartung, Bruce (2014) "Reformation Day • Revelation 14:6–7 • October 26, 2014," *Concordia Journal*: Vol. 40: No. 3, Article 18.
Available at: <http://scholar.csl.edu/cj/vol40/iss3/18>

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Like the beginning of a great meal, Revelation 14:6–7 goes well with the psalm for this Sunday (Psalm 46) for the celebration of the Reformation. They are excellent companions because both express unshaking vision to see the presence and activity of God, even in the midst of great trial and calamity, even in the midst of terrible natural and human caused trauma. They both speak dramatically and forcefully to those who suffer calamity and suffering. Though “the earth be shaken and mountains quake to the depth of the sea,” we do not fear (Ps 46: 3). Why? Because “God is our refuge and our strength, an ever present help in distress” (Ps 46:1) and because this God, “The Lord of Hosts is with us; our stronghold is the God of Jacob” (Ps 46:7).

Who is the Lord of Hosts? “Then I saw another angel flying overhead, with everlasting good news to announce to those who dwell on earth, in every nation, tribe, tongue, and people. He said in a loud voice, ‘Fear God and give him glory, for His time has come to sit in judgment. Worship him who made heaven and earth and seas and springs of water’ (Rv 14:6–7).

Served together they make a great pair, but this is not totally good news. The God who is our refuge and strength, who is the creator of all things, comes to judge. There does need to be something else added to the meal, and the preacher must do so as he uses the rest of the appointed readings to holistically speak both law and gospel. The preacher will find the additional ingredients in the epistle reading (Romans 3:19–28) or one of the two gospel readings (John 8:31–36 or Matthew 11:12–19) for the day. But can the preacher also find it further along in Revelation? “Here is what sustains the holy ones who keep God’s commandments and their faith in Jesus. I heard a voice from heaven say, ‘Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ‘Yes,’ said the Spirit, ‘let them find rest from their labors, for their works accompany them’” (Rv 14:13). Even these additional verses from Revelation desperately need the additional ingredient of the pure and sweet gospel: “All have sinned and are deprived

of the glory of God. They are justified freely by his grace through the redemption in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:23–24).

To stay with the picture of God as returning to judge, even to make right that which is wrong in the world, and having that as the primary emotional element of the sermon leaves all hearers in despair. Adequate preaching demands at least all the ingredients above.

Still, Revelation is a powerful book: victory finally comes with the end-of-time appearance of Christ, Satan is completely overthrown and the followers of Christ will triumph.

In the midst of natural and human caused trauma (see Psalm 46); in the midst of the rule of the great Babylon (generally understood to be Rome at the time of the Revelation but now in the twenty-first century could take on all kinds of oppressive rule of the temptations of our flesh, the world, and Satan), hold firm, by the power of the very Spirit of God, to Christ because this Christ will always hold you firmly; and, finally, all will be made right in the last day and at the return of the Christ.

There is great comfort here as long as all the ingredients of the appointed readings are used. Otherwise, if the preacher just exhorts to endure this present suffering with faith in Christ he raises the question of whether the hearer’s endurance or faith is strong enough to do so. Our God, our “ever present help in distress” is present with us in Christ who holds us tightly and sustains us with his Spirit in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, the waters of our baptism, the ingestion of his word and the company of the saints who surround us in the community of his followers. It is all this that strengthens us to live in Christ even through the most distressing circumstances.

To set the beginning tone, the preacher could ask his hearers to consider what afflictions, troubles, traumas, or difficulties they currently face. Perhaps the preacher could even share something with which he is struggling. Connect those to the afflictions of the followers of Christ at the time that this apocalyptic book was written. Then let loose with empathy for the struggle and encouragement of the redemptive presence of Christ through it all, and, if something personal is shared, share also about how these readings have worked in the preacher’s mind and heart. And, in all this, as we are saying these days at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis: Let the gospel lead (and also predominate), and let the presence of the Triune God be our comfort and hope!

As an endnote: this reading is assigned to the celebration of the Reformation. Perhaps that is because some Lutheran commentators identify Babylon with the papacy and the angel in verse 6 as a foretelling of Martin Luther.¹ I believe it is well to avoid this theme. Once we begin to turn a literary form such as Revelation into specific prophecy of historical people to come, we start getting into all kinds of problems (such as only 144,000 people will be saved). So it is simply good not to start. Stay with the intention of the book of Revelation and the gospel that predominates all preaching.

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¹ Paul E. Kretzman, *Popular Commentary of the Bible – New Testament*, Vol. 2, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1922), 631.