

Sermon

The Gospel without a Gospel
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Martin Luther was a one-issue theologian, writes a modern Luther scholar, and that issue was the gospel. The gospel is the surprising news that by grace, that is, without any merit on our part, God embraces and accepts us. It is the message, the Word of God embedded within – though not identical with – the words **about** God in Scripture, that God loves us **unconditionally**, that this love was experienced by human beings through the person of Jesus, and that through this same Jesus we are liberated, reconciled, and forgiven by God irrespective of anything we have done or left undone. In essence, the gospel is a message of hope, the reassurance that the God who first appears as wrathful and terrible or – for some of us – never seems to appear at all is really a “God of love and peace,” as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 13:11, a God who promises to be as present in the darkest moments of our lives just as He was in Christ’s, a God who vows to those who weep in the night that joy will come, if not with the actual sunrise of the next morning, then with the light of dawn in the world to come.

This message – a promise meant to be spoken, announced, pondered, and trusted according to Luther – comes as a shock to anyone who truly hears what it is saying. Nothing you do can make you right with God. The power of sin has entered the world through Adam (Romans 5:12), turning us in on ourselves and compelling us to act without regard for others. God understands that. This is why God comes to us, claiming us in baptism before we can even respond. Be careful, though! While the message of God’s free and liberating grace can be life-giving for some, it can be downright offensive to others.

I remember a conversation I had with the father of a child I taught in confirmation class years ago when I was an intern pastor in Minnesota. He was outraged. “My son said you told him that he doesn’t have to do anything to be saved. Is that true?” “That’s exactly what I’m told him,” I replied. “But don’t blame me. Blame Martin Luther. And before Luther blame St. Augustine. And before St. Augustine blame the Apostle Paul. God loves your son no matter what. That’s what being “saved by grace” means. Through *His* Son, God loves *your* son

unconditionally. That's the good news, the gospel." I paused. "God even loves you."

In truth, of course, I did not say "God even loves you." I would never do that! But I did pause, and to this day I can remember why: it was then that the **radical nature of the gospel** became apparent to me. Later I would discover "the rest of the story," that the grace of God in Jesus Christ sets us free not simply to do as we please but to **respond** to God's love by caring for the needs of our neighbor. I would also learn how Luther's critics pounced on him by insisting that people would take advantage of their Christian freedom as "an occasion for the flesh." Understandably, this was the concern of the parent with whom I was speaking. "Tell my son he is free from having to earn God's love," he might have been thinking, "and he will use that as an excuse to indulge in bad behavior and stop going to church." That's the last thing a parent needs, right? But just because the gospel of Christian freedom is prone to misunderstanding does not mean we should keep it to ourselves. Take Luther as an example. He "was never willing to back down from describing the Christian's life under the heading of freedom," even though he recognized the teaching could be abused (Lull, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 2 ed., p. 386).

Now if you think the message of such radical love on God's part is surprising, I have another surprise for you this morning: there is no gospel in today's Gospel. What we have instead are words of **fear and judgment** followed by what may be the greatest **non-sequitur** in all 27 books of the New Testament! The scene features John the Baptist. I imagine him almost in a frenzy, yelling at the crowds who have gathered at the River Jordan: "You den of snakes!" he shouts. "Who warned you to run from the wrath to come?" These "words of welcome" (I say this sarcastically) precede the first of two images John uses to illustrate the wrath in question. "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees," he declares, "every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." The second image is like the first. Speaking of the coming Messiah, John says his "winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Luke 3:9, 17).

Let's be clear: these are hardly comforting words! Those who fail to measure up to God's expectations, John says, will be **cut down** by the **ax** of judgment and then **thrown into the fire**. According to the second image John offers, the Messiah uses what we would call a pitchfork to separate the wheat (i.e., the righteous) from its shell or husk (i.e., the unrighteous). A thresher would have done this either by beating the plant or by raising it up into the air so that the wind would carry the chaff away. John, however, makes matters worse: the chaff will be cast into **unquenchable fire**. This kind of language first became popular during the Middle Ages. Preachers would terrify their audiences with threats of hellfire and damnation, causing them to doubt their salvation. The Lutheran Reformation was essentially *a pastoral response* to the absolute dread generated by such preaching by reassuring people that nothing – as Paul says in Romans 8:39 – could separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Now what about that **non-sequitur** I mentioned? Take a look at verse 18. There, after presenting his listeners with the image of a Messiah who will utterly destroy the unrighteous, the narrator closes by saying, “[And] so, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.” Wait. What? When did John say anything in the preceding three paragraphs that would remotely qualify as good news? Sure, he may have presented his listeners with the *possibility* of salvation, a possibility they never knew they had, but what about the gut-wrenching doubt he introduced simultaneously? Think about it. At what point can I **know** I am among the righteous? How can I be **sure** I have done enough to meet God's expectations? The closing statement does not logically follow what came before, and to make matters worse, I said “the Gospel of the Lord” after reading it even though the reading contains nothing of the gospel?

The Genius of the Lectionary

Obviously not every verse, passage, or even book in the Bible contains the gospel, which can refer generally to the proclamation of God's steadfast love and more specifically to the manifestation of that love in the person of Jesus Christ. Some of it contains the law, namely, what God expects us to do to live in harmony with God as well as with each other. When people fail to live up to

these standards, the Bible speaks of God's judgment. Luther likewise spoke of God's judgment, but he recognized something preachers before and after him have often forgotten: without a word of hope, condemning people with a list of "do's and do not's" leads only to despair, which is why I thank God for the lectionary.

Let me explain. The lectionary contains all the passages from Scripture we read during a worship service. The editors chose the readings within it to tell the story of Jesus according to the major events of his life and ministry. They recognized, as the early church did, that to understand God's activity in Jesus, we must also understand what God was doing before him in the tradition out of which he came. This is why we have three readings, one from the Old Testament, one from the New Testament, and one from the Gospels in the New Testament. The reading from the Old Testament helps to illuminate whichever part of Jesus' life happens to be our focus. While the lectionary only includes about a third of the Bible, it organizes biblical material in a way conforms to the church year. We begin with Advent, anticipating the birth of Christ, and we conclude with Pentecost as the church takes the good news of God's love and the message of God's victory over sin and death to the ends of the earth.

The lectionary brings with it an additional benefit, one that its editors probably did not intend. When the Gospel reading of the day fails to deliver the gospel, the message of good news, we can turn to the first and second lesson and try to find it there. As it turns out, we find the gospel in Zephaniah, which helps remind us that just as a reading from the New Testament may contain law and judgment like we see in Luke 3:7-18, a reading from the Old Testament can contain the gospel. Watch out, in other words, for people who refer to the Old Testament "God of judgment" as somehow distinct from the New Testament "God of love." Each testament contains both! Take a look, for example, at the "Oracles of Joy" we find in Zephaniah. After a sharp word of rebuke against the Israelites for worshipping other gods, Zephaniah envisions a time in Jerusalem's future when the Lord will be among his people, causing them to rejoice and "renewing [them] in love" (3:17). Then God speaks directly through the prophet beginning with v. 18: "I will remove disaster from you," God says. "I will save

the lame and gather the outcast." Finally, God says, "I will bring you home" (3:20).

We turn next to the second reading where once again we hear the gospel in all its clarity. "The Lord is near," Paul writes, echoing Zephaniah's affirmation that the Lord is in the midst of his people (3:15, 17). This is good news, and it gets even better. "Do not worry about anything," Paul continues, "but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:5-7). The good news, in short, appears throughout the Bible. According to Luther, however, the people of his time have been led astray. "Necessity demands, therefore, that there should be a notice or preface, by which the ordinary [person] can be rescued from his former delusions," Luther writes, "set on the right track, and taught what he is to look for, so that he may not seek laws and commandments [and be ruled by fear] where he ought to be seeking the gospel and [the] promises of God."

The Good News for You

I like to think of the gospel, following a mentor of mine, as good news for people in difficult situations. Over the past year, many of us have found ourselves facing challenging if not overwhelming situations in our lives. Which of the passages I highlighted speak to you? How does the promise of God to Israel or to the Philippians bounce from their circumstances to yours? Do you find comfort, for instance, in Paul's reminder that you need not worry about anything because God is near? If so, cling to that passage. It has become the Word of God for you. Memorize it! Or do you receive reassurance when, having been unable to attend worship services due to Covid, you hear the promise God once spoke to Israel, namely, that **God will bring you home**, that God will gather us in, that God will restore the fellowship we have lost, and that God will grant us God's **unfathomable peace** by guarding our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus?

And so we end, not with the talk of wrath and judgment according to John the Baptist in Luke, but with the unexpected presence of the gospel in Zephaniah

and Paul thanks to the lectionary. What a life-giving way of reading and hearing Scripture. For us as Christians, this same gospel will soon appear in the form of a child. What better way for God to surprise us than to become present not in the “glory” of war or in deeds of power, but in the innocence and vulnerability of child lying in a manger? “I see nothing in heaven and earth but this child,” Luther wrote. The message is simple: **God has pierced the darkness of this world in the cradle of Christ.** What incredible grace! What incredible freedom! What an incredible gospel!

Martin Luther was a one issue theologian, and that issue was the gospel. The message that we are **unconditionally** accepted by God through Christ, he held, was one that makes or breaks the church. Through it we are set free from worrying about ourselves so that we can serve others. Because of it we are called to witness to a message of peace, and by it we are granted the light of hope beyond the shadows of despair. May each of us this morning find comfort in this message of God’s love and peace; may we share this peace in care for our world and in service to our neighbor; and may we be opened to the surprises of God, like finding His gospel in places like the Old Testament as well as His presence and victory in places like the vulnerability of a child. Such is the surprise of the gospel, and such is the gospel of our Lord.

Amen.