

The license plate from the state of North Carolina makes, what I would call, a very bold claim. It says, "First in flight." I realize that the first powered and sustained flight took place in an airplane right in North Carolina. In fact, it was on December 17, 1903 in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina that Orville Wright made the first human flight. The flight was 12 seconds long covering 120 feet. That flight makes the people of North Carolina proud enough to say, "First in flight," on just about all of their cars. It's actually quite ironic- a license plate for a car which takes pride in flying.

Now, it may be true that the first powered, human flight took place in North Carolina, but it wouldn't be fair to say that the Wright brothers were truly first in flight. Long before Orville and Wilbur Wright were even born, something else was flying. It was the Gospel. Don't misunderstand what I am saying. A Bible did not sprout wings and fly around for all people to see. Instead God gave the Gospel wings through his people, flying it to the hearts and minds of every nation, tribe, language, and people. Really the license plate of the gospel could read, "Truly First in Flight; not North Carolina."

But let's not quibble about history, at least not right now. What really matters is flight today. Clearly United, Delta, Southwest, and are others are flying the blue, friendly skies, but what about the Gospel? Is the Gospel still flying in our time? Look at all the flights that were canceled recently by the storm Sandy. Has the Gospel flight been canceled too? If you attend many churches today, you get some instructions on how to improve your life, but no mention of your sins and the Gospel. I drive my golf cart to church on a Sunday morning and I am passed by so many golf carts headed for their Sunday morning T Time. There is so much fun stuff to do around here, who wants to spend time hearing about my sins. Is the Gospel still flying today?

If it were not for John's Revelation, we might not be able to answer that question very well. However, the fact remains that God's Word in Revelation gives us great comfort and great encouragement in the face of a world which would love to see the flight of the gospel grounded forever. Today, the Holy Spirit is saying, come on Christian, Let's "Fly the Friendly Skies with the Gospel!"

Our text is taken from one of the most misunderstood books of the Bible, the book of Revelation. Revelation is often misinterpreted because many forget that it is a book of symbols. For example in the first chapter of Revelation, the Apostle John describes a vision he had of Jesus. He saw Jesus dressed in white and walking among seven golden lampstands. This vision was not a peek into Jesus' heavenly living room. The golden lampstands were not Jesus' choice for interior lighting. The lampstands symbolized churches. We know this because Jesus tells us (Revelation 1:20c). In that same vision John saw Jesus holding stars in his hand. Jesus explains that these stars symbolized the "angels" of the churches (Revelation 1:20b). To understand what Jesus meant by that we need to know that the Greek word "angel" simply means, "messenger." Context will determine whether the messenger spoken about is a heavenly one, like the angel Gabriel, or an earthly one, like a prophet. The angels that Jesus held in his hand were not heavenly messengers; they were the pastors of the congregations to whom John was to send the book of Revelation.

Knowing that the word “angel” simply means, “messenger” will help us understand our lesson. Who was this angel and why is it significant that he was flying in midair with the “eternal” gospel? The angel John saw could certainly represent heavenly angels for one of their tasks is to share messages from God. Think of how heavenly angels told the shepherds about the birth of Jesus. But when’s the last time a heavenly angel told you the good news about Jesus? What other “angels” (messengers) have spoken to you about Jesus? Perhaps the first people to tell you about Jesus were your parents. Others that have told you about Jesus are your Sunday School teachers and pastors. Whenever you tell someone about Jesus, you’re an angel - a messenger from God and a fulfillment of this vision John saw.

What exactly is the Gospel that this angel proclaims? The word gospel means good news. It is the good news that Jesus Christ made the one time payment on a cross for all of our sins. It is the good news that we are saved through what God has done for us. In the book of Revelation it says about Jesus, “You are worthy to take the scroll and open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.” Five hundred years ago the gospel message that we are saved because of what Jesus has done was in danger of being lost. God, however, ensured that the gospel message continued to ring out loudly and clearly. He used a man by the name of Martin Luther to get that message out. Martin Luther, for years of his life felt like an alcoholic or addict. Martin Luther felt guilt and shame for the things he had done wrong in his life. Like an addict or alcoholic, he tried do a step 9 by making amends for the wrongs he had done. He tried as best he could to do what God wanted. He entered a monastery. He beat himself, he prayed, he worshiped. He would do all he could to escape God’s wrath.

He struggled and struggled with this, until as a Professor he sat down and studied Romans 1. In it he read that in the Gospel a righteousness has come to us from God - by faith. At that point Luther said to himself, “the Gospel is the good news that Jesus lived a perfect life as my substitute, and that he died on the cross. He didn’t die for Himself, so He must have died for me. How does His righteousness become mine? Not by beating myself and trying to reform my life, but simply by faith in Jesus! All that He has becomes mine through faith! He became what He was not - sin - so that I would become what I was not - righteous!” This “tower experience” set him free from the deceit that he had been put under for his whole life - that he had to punish himself for his sins - and set himself free from God’s wrath.

Luther was an “angel” to the people of his day and through his writings still speaks to us today.

Is that the message you believe? You say, “Of course it is!” But I wonder if we’re not a little like the man in the following story. A man died and stood before St. Peter at the gates of heaven. Peter said: “Here’s how it works. You tell me all the good things that you’ve done, I’ll tally them up, and when you score a hundred points, you get to come into heaven.” The man hesitated for a moment and then said: “Well, I was married to the same woman for fifty years and never cheated on her, not even in my heart.” “Great,” said Peter. “That’s worth two points.” “Two points?” the man asked. “Well I attended church all my and life and supported its ministry with my offering and talents.” “Terrific,” exclaimed Peter. “That’s certainly worth a point.”

“One point?!” the man retorted. “I started a soup kitchen and worked in a shelter for the homeless. I spent my Thanksgiving and Christmas days serving dinners to the less fortunate.” “Fantastic! That’s good for two more points,” said Peter. Exasperated the man cried: “At this rate the only way I’ll get into heaven is by the grace of God!” “Bingo! One hundred points. Welcome to heaven!” replied Peter.

As Lutherans we claim to know and believe that we are saved by God’s grace through faith in Jesus. Yet how often don’t we think, like the man in the story, that God owes us something for the things we’ve done for him? And how quickly we forget or take lightly our sins whether jealousy or pride. Sure we know that these things are wrong but we often think that God will gloss over them because we’re otherwise decent people. Friends, if we rely on anything or anyone other than Jesus for salvation – we have no salvation. Supposing that our good deeds will get us into heaven is like using duct tape to make repairs when only a nail will do. And that’s exactly what God did; he fixed our problem of sin with a nail. What needs to be added to what God has done? What can we add? Nothing. Jesus has done everything necessary for salvation. Believe it.

Now that we have the Gospel, God makes us angels so that, through us, the Gospel will fly to many others. Right now there are hundreds of thousands of us WELS Lutherans scattered all over the world flying with the Gospel. Right now Jimmy is witnessing to Jamie in Hong Kong. Timmy is studying the Bible with Johnny in Times Square. In Montana, Matt is praying with Sara. The Gospel is not sleeping, walking, strolling, or sprinting. It is moving at the speed of sound to the hearts of the world. But not only that, it is flying in midair.

Why is the angel flying in midair? Simply put, so that everyone can see him. Companies pay good money to pilots who fly around pulling a banner that advertises their product because they figure that way up there in the air many people will see it. You could say that the angel was in midair so that many people could see him. In other words so that he could proclaim the gospel “to every nation, tribe, language, and people.”

But how can we make it happen so that everyone hears the Gospel-every tribe, nation, language and people? You are only one person and you know only a few people. You probably only speak one language, maybe two. How can you possibly fly to every nation, tribe, language and people? It’s true that you are just one person, but you join with many others who want the Gospel to fly just like you do. That is why you are a member of this church. That is why you are a church is a member of the Wisconsin Synod. We want all people to hear the Gospel. In fact that is what synod means. It means walking together.

There were many nay-sayers ahead of the Wright brothers’ first flight in North Carolina. In the same way we face Satan and his primary opposition to the flight of the Gospel. He has not yet been permanently damned and locked away in hell. Even so, the Gospel is still true and will prevail. It is our Gospel. It is ours to proclaim. Let’s take our Gospel so graciously given to us and fly with it to the ends of the earth. It’s time for me to fly! Amen.