

First Sunday after Christmas – 2024

Exodus 13:1-3a, 11-15

Colossians 3:12-17

Luke 2:22-40

Simeon knew that God was going to give Israel more. The Messiah, the fulfiller of divine promises, the promised embodiment of all that Simeon saw around him – Simeon was expectant, patiently expecting His arrival. More; Simeon's faith told him that God was going to give Israel more. It wasn't ingratitude for what he had. Simeon wasn't turning his nose up at the grace that was laid before him in the sacrificial system, in the life of faith lived out at the Temple as God's people followed the worship prescribed by the Torah. But Simeon was waiting for more. St. Luke writes this descriptive line: "Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him" (Luke 2:25).

Consolation; are you familiar with the word? It's an important word. Have you ever consoled someone? The formal definition for "console" is "to comfort (someone) at a time of grief or disappointment." The informal definition is to try to help someone feel better who is hurting. Have you ever consoled anyone? It is a regular human enterprise because we are so frequently disappointed or worse. There are a number of merciless detractors in life. Relationships that sour, assaults on our health, employment misery, chronic physical pain, loss of one sort or another – the most severe being the death of a loved one. To feel someone's pain and attempt to help soften the blow – we all should be prepared to console. When someone looks you in the eye, their shoulders drooping, their eyes moist, their heart clearly breaking – you are to be, at that moment, an agent of divine consolation. Better find your spine. Better find the substance to extend. People need consolation.

As a youth, I competed in an assortment of sports, swimming being the earliest. At meets, ribbons were the treasure. Blue ribbon for first, red for second, and white for third. At one meet, a big meet, I didn't get any of those. I got a "consolation prize." You lost, here's your purple ribbon – go and console yourself with that. On another occasion, I got slaughtered as an 11-year-old on the tennis court by my doubles partner. As I was crying my eyes out in a college garden, my father doing his best to lift my spirits, a bird came down and perched on my shoulder. Childhood disappointments are one thing; heavy blows later in life are another. Genuine consolation is not a LifeSavers candy, not a Little Orphan Annie melody, not a purple ribbon or a well-timed visit from a bird. Genuine consolation is more. Genuine consolation is deeper. Genuine consolation addresses our pain, our sorrows, our loss... and reverses it.

The infant Lord comes to His Temple. Mary and Joseph are to redeem Him who is the Redeemer of the world. The Torah, the Law of Moses, prescribed that every first-born of Israel belonged to the Lord. This was a product of the Exodus. The tenth plague, the final and defining plague of death, was to sweep through Egypt. God, by a strong hand, had every intention of delivering His people from a land of slavery, a land of death. Blood marked the doors of the Israelites – lamb's blood. Painted all around the door, the blood of the lamb protected those inside. Death swept through Egypt that night and all the first-born sons of Egypt perished. Israel's sons were delivered. **God wanted this deliverance remembered, rehearsed,**

kept alive in His people's minds so He instituted this liturgical practice. A lamb, or if you are poor, two turtledoves or two young pigeons are to be sacrificed to redeem, to buy back, the firstborn, male or female (Leviticus 12:8). Since Jesus is the true Lamb that will be sacrificed on the holy cross, and because Joseph and Mary are poor, two birds are offered for Him.

Simeon is there. An aged man, it is reckoned; Simeon is there. Wise, tender, faithful, Simeon is waiting for the consolation of Israel. He knew that God had more. It had been revealed to Simeon that he would not see death until he had seen the Lord's Christ (Luke 2:26). That is the more for which Simeon waited. God revealed Himself to Simeon. Unless God reveals Himself to us we can't know Him. It is a disclosure, a revelation, an act of self-giving. Simeon received an epiphany. Simeon knew and He rejoiced – the consolation of Israel is this baby, this Messianic Savior, the fulfillment of God's promises. Jesus is more and Simeon knew it. Elation, relief, hope – it fills Simeon's heart and pours out of his mouth. It is a song of departure that Simeon sings, and we'll get to that in a minute. But think about old men.

Have old men seen people suffer? The older one gets the more one sees, good and bad. Do old men and old women have those they love come to them needing consolation? Had Simeon seen loss, including death, gnaw at his family, gnaw at his friends' families? Will it end? Will death, in this world, ever go on hiatus? Will the young and the good regularly face calamity and need consolation? Here are two stories that you know. A widow is grieving because her only son had died. She is in the midst of his funeral procession. Jesus, the Lord of Life, is on His own procession and the two collide in the town of Nain. Consolation is in His voice and His action. "Do not weep" (Luke 7:13). "Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, arise.' And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother" (Luke 7:14-15). That is consolation.

Jairus looked all over for help, for consolation. None was found. His twelve-year-old daughter was desperately sick. Jairus' heart is full of apprehension. Finally, the Lord is found and beseeched. Jesus agrees to come and give aid. On the way, the messenger brings the dread news. "Your daughter is dead; do not trouble the Teacher any more" (Luke 8:49). The consolation which Christ brings knows no barriers. To the girl's bedside they go. "Child, arise" (Luke 8:54). So said the Consolation of Israel. "And her spirit returned, and she got up at once" (Luke 8:55). That is authentic consolation. Simeon, in beholding the infant Savior, sees this consolation for God had revealed Himself to Simeon.

In His Word, God has revealed Himself to you. Think of it... those who would console another need to get close. Those who would extend the very heart of comfort need to embrace the pained, the grieving, the disconsolate. Who has done that? Jesus, your consolation, has done that thoroughly. He has embraced you, taken your sin, your sorrow, and your death. Our Lord suffered for all of us without hesitation, coming close to us in His incarnation – being made one with us sinners as He dies. He identifies with those who know pain, those who face a loss so severe that it feels as though it will swallow us up. He allowed death to swallow Him so that He could genuinely console you. Resurrection is our consolation. Our faith has an answer to what troubles humanity. Finding your spine and delivering consolation is believing this message with all your heart and mind and then delivering it with love, tenderness to one who hurts.

Jeanette Bailey hurts. Joe Belli's three ladies hurt. We have a stellar sorority of women who have been through this pain, who know how to console – Ingrid, Lorrie, Kaye, Denise, Jill, Judy, Connie, Elsie, Sharon, Kathleen, Betty – I'm sure that there are others. "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26). Russ Bailey and Joe Belli did. Christ's blood protected them from death. They are in heaven. They are in God's presence. Their souls are full. Love, joy, completeness, the redemption which Christ purchased for them by His blood – they are in heaven. That is good. That consoles the heart. Only time separates us and time is moving us toward them, toward heaven, toward Christ and His marriage banquet. This altar presents a foretaste of that banquet. You sing Simeon's song after you commune here. God wants Simeon and His song remembered. God wants the consolation of Christ crucified and risen rehearsed, imbibed. This Divine Service is an epiphany. God reveals Himself to us and in reply we sing: Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace according to Thy word, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people, a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of Thy people Israel.