

The First Sunday After Christmas – 2020

Isaiah 61:10—62:3

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 2:22-40

Have you ever helped someone die? It is perhaps the most intimate service that one can render to another. A dying person needs a friend, a good friend, a good *Christian* friend. In a certain sense, everyone dies alone. No one goes with you, from life to death. The phrase I used, “helping someone die,” is very intentional. We need help; to die well, to die confidently, to die content and peacefully. I’ve only been on one side of this, but I’ve seen it plenty. The power of God’s Word in the face of death is remarkable. We live this faith day to day. As the baptized people of God we pray, we bless one another, we gather for the Divine Service, we contemplate God’s grace, we study His Word, we receive His body and blood and we sing the majestic hymns of the church. Day to day, week to week, year to year – we live this faith. And we die but once. Trepidation lurks near the heart of a dying soul. Fear, apprehension, dread – to feel life slipping out of your body is unnerving. We need help to die.

It’s not my custom to bark orders to God’s people. Certainly, as your pastor I am to convey God’s Word, calling people to repentance, making clear what God has said in regard to sin, in regard to behavior which He has said is unacceptable and I am to do this without equivocation. “Thus sayeth the Lord” is the ground on which a pastor is to walk. What I am about to say to you is more from the domain of my personal perspective – do with it what you will. If you are unprepared to help someone die because you feel inadequate in your ability to articulate the faith, or because the situation is too overwhelming for you or for some other reason, then it’s time for you to man up. Every Christian needs to have the will, the charity to push aside every other consideration and speak the strongest words of Gospel truth to a dying saint. Not platitudes, not cliches, not sentimental pablum but personal words, full of love; those words are to be spoken, articulated. Words that put Christ in the center of life; words that are full of His bloody cross, His triumph over sin, His mighty resurrection, His perpetual ministry to bring His life to bear on us – you are to speak those words. You must be prepared to do this... for others.

The people who do this best are those who themselves are prepared to die. Simeon serves as our guide in this. The infant Lord comes to His Temple. Forty days old, Jesus’ mother and Joseph travel to Jerusalem to fulfill the Law regarding “every male who first opens the womb” (Luke 2:23). Simeon is there. He has been waiting. Consolation is what He is waiting for. This life is very often not pretty, not comfortable, not fun. People look for consolation. People hunt high and low for every conceivable way to cope with trouble in life, and they light upon something that they think will turn things around. An adulterous relationship, alcohol, gambling, clothing, makeovers, food, shopping sprees, travel, philosophy, perpetual political wrangling, endless entertainment – vanity, vanity, vanity. Looking for consolation in these things not only doesn’t help but very often makes the problem worse. It may deaden the pain temporarily, but it does not console. Our Lord brings us something MORE.

Hope and comfort and genuine consolation; it was promised to Simeon that it was coming – the consolation of Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon Simeon. It had been revealed to him that his eyes would see the Lord’s Christ before he would see death (Luke 2:26). The church has long

seen Simeon as an old man. Is it only old men who are ready to leave this life? Certainly, the aged grow fatigued with this world and its vanity, but is it only the aged? Simeon is waiting. Need has put him there, at the Temple.

What is Simeon's need? Salvation; God either provides it or man dies in his sin. Simeon was in need. Death without hope, death without forgiveness – dread is all that is left; fear and dread and all manner of dark thoughts. Salvation – God had promised it. Salvation was coming and Simeon waited. His eyes lighted on the infant and Simeon knew, all of God's promises intersected upon this child, this Messianic figure of grace; Simeon knew. Waiting had reached its end. This is the One, this *is* God's salvation. He will do it. He will *be* it. Simeon knew that Jesus had not come to play tiddlywinks. The load He would bear would not be theoretical. The road He came to walk would not be computer generated.

“A body you prepared for me” (Hebrews 10:5). “I have come to do your will, O God” (Hebrews 10:7). The Son of God had a body prepared for Him and that body would be the vessel, the instrument of salvation. Just like you is He. Just like you, yet without sin. In our flesh came God eternal to meet death, to meet suffering, to meet the misery of sin and corruption and all that is wrong with creation. The infant Lord who is brought to the Temple to have a sacrifice offered for Him would be brought to the cross and made *the* sacrifice for the world. Seeing His cross, the Lord Christ, the divine consolation of Israel said this: “Now my soul is troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father save me from this hour?’ No, it was *for this very reason* I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!” (John 12:27-28).

Jesus grappled with every enemy known to man and was victorious. Do you know what that is? That is consolation. In His own human flesh, the Son of God rendered Himself up to the Father in your place, perfectly – *that* is consolation. By His death and resurrection, we are heirs of His kingdom, sons and daughters by adoption, and death cannot harm us. That is consolation. In this noisome world, the peace of Christmas is yours, the triumph of Easter is yours, the hope of heaven is yours... not “someday,” but today.

Simeon, after holding the infant Christ, can you see him helping one of his friends die? How would he do it? What would he say? He would bring to mind all the promises of God and then anchor them in the salvation he saw with his eyes, the revelation which God gave him by the Holy Spirit. Simeon was ready. That made him a great resource for the church. I want Simeon as my friend. I want his attitude in my wife, in my son. So, how, exactly, do you differ from blessed Simeon? Has the Lord not clothed you with the garment of salvation? Has not the Christ been revealed to you? Has His blood not covered you with the robe of righteousness? Consolation, the priceless consolation of faith, is in your mind, your heart. Give that consolation to those who need it. At some point, if it hasn't happened already, each of you will be faced with opportunity.

Everyone needs consolation. The dying will need what you have to offer. Regardless of their apparent faith, those who are on the threshold of heaven need you. Think about why God gave us these words through Isaiah: “Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, ‘Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you’” (Isaiah 35:3-4). The

Gospel breeds confidence, trust, and a lively hope. Resurrection was in Simeon's mind as he spoke his death prayer, the Nunc Dimittis. His prayer is anchored in your memory, for you have sung it innumerable times, as you leave this altar, having received the King's body and blood – truest consolation. It is the Lord of this altar who prepares you; He consoles you: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (John 11:25).

The Golden Rule – you know the golden rule. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Do you want that friend, that good friend, that good Christian friend to remind you of Christ's love, Christ's sacrifice, His authority and grace? Then remember these words of St. Paul and be ready: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). Truly, because of Christ, none of us will die alone. He is the holy One who goes with us, from life – through death – to life eternal. He goes with us for He is the Way.

On the holy cross, as He bore the fractious weight of man's horrible deeds, there was none to console Him. Sacred Head, horribly wounded, with grief and shame weighed down. In that act, in that sacrifice your eternal consolation was in view. To bless you and sustain you, the Son of God Almighty died. To console you in whatever grief this world brings, the Lord of heaven and earth died. Receiving His consolation, we **mount up**; courage is born of His consolation – courage and strength and fortitude and hope. Christ the King's consolation provides momentum; we walk toward heaven, each day closer to consolation in a cup that runneth over. We shall run in this life, the race marked out for us; we shall run and not be weary. We walk toward heaven. We will not faint. Why? Because Christ, our incarnate consolation, is with us.